

The Taliban has yet to respond to Mr. Ghani's proposal. But in a statement on Monday, they said they had asked American officials to talk directly to their political office, and not through the Afghan government. The statement also said that "military strategies which have repeatedly been tested in Afghanistan over the past 17 years will only intensify and prolong the war."

Under President Trump, the American strategy for ending the war has entailed expanding a campaign of airstrikes and putting pressure on Pakistan to force the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government.

American commanders have claimed progress, but only in measures that are classified. A Pentagon study made public this month showed that the Afghan government controlled 18 percent of the country's districts at the end of last year and had influence over an additional 38 percent.

While the insurgents dominate only a sliver of the country, they still hold substantial sway. The Taliban collect taxes from businesses and run a shadow judicial system for settling disputes, preferred by some Afghans over the corrupt government courts.

In one measure of the Taliban's reach, cellphone companies comply with the group's request to halt service around 5 p.m. in parts of the country, including in Kunduz, a major city, lest the insurgents blow up transmission towers. The blackouts demonstrate influence, and the Taliban say they also serve a practical purpose of preventing government informants from calling in tips about their nighttime movements.

Around dusk on Tuesday, insurgents attacked a checkpoint in Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan, killing five police officers, and later stopped a bus and captured 19 passengers as hostages, according to a police spokesman.

The peace talks known as the Kabul Process began last year and are intended to demonstrate unity in the international community for negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The United Nations also backs this approach.

Egypt Is Using Banned U.S.-Made Cluster Munitions In Sinai, Rights Group Says

By Rick Gladstone And Nour Youssef

New York Times, February 28, 2018

Egypt's armed forces have used internationally outlawed cluster bombs, made in the United States, in operations aimed at crushing Islamic extremists in northern Sinai, Amnesty International said Wednesday.

The use of such weapons, if confirmed, would not only contravene the treaty banning their use, signed by a majority of countries, but may also violate United States laws regarding recipients of American military aid, like Egypt.

Amnesty International said an analysis of an official Feb. 21 video released by the Egyptian military, trumpeting the triumphs of its northern Sinai crackdown on militants, showed one of the weapons, which can kill and maim indiscriminately.

Although the video described the weapons as improvised explosive devices planted by the militants, Amnesty said, the markings on one identified it as an American-made Mk-118 anti-tank anti-personnel submunition, "which could only have been dropped by the Egyptian Air Force."

Amnesty said the video showed the weapon to be "untampered with and in good condition despite its age," with an identifying number clearly visible. "This suggests that the submunition has been deployed in recent operations," Amnesty said in a news release.

"This new video confirms our worst fears, that the Egyptian armed forces are using cluster bombs in North Sinai," the group said.

While there have been other suggestions that Egyptian forces are using cluster munitions in the Sinai campaign, the video was proof, said Raed Jarrar, Amnesty's advocacy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"This is like the smoking gun, because it's very obvious that these munitions were dropped from a fighter jet," he said in a telephone interview.

Mr. Jarrar suggested that the video, released by the Egyptian military spokesman's office, had inadvertently betrayed, to knowledgeable viewers, what they were really seeing.

"The Egyptian government is so deep in its own lies and propaganda, they have lost track of their own lies," Mr. Jarrar said.

There was no immediate reaction from the Egyptian government to Amnesty's assertion, which was released early Thursday Egyptian time. Officials at the Defense Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment. A State Department official, responding on the condition of anonymity, did not address Amnesty's assertion about the Feb. 21 video. But the official said in an emailed statement that "the Department continues to emphasize to our Egyptian government interlocutors the importance of a comprehensive approach to counterterrorism that protects and minimizes damage to civilian populations."

Cluster munitions encompass an array of rockets, bombs, missiles and artillery projectiles that scatter smaller weapons, called submunitions, over a wide area. They can hit civilians far from intended targets. Roughly 20 percent fail to properly detonate upon impact, leaving unexploded bomblets that can kill civilians even years later.

Egypt, like other Middle East countries, has not signed the treaty banning cluster munitions. While the United States

has not signed the treaty either, it pledged in 2008 to restrict their use.

Department of Defense documentation obtained by Human Rights Watch and cited in their cluster munition survey shows that Egypt possessed 1,300 Rockeye cluster bombs, containing 321,000 Mk-118 submunitions, as of 2007.

Stephen Goose, director of Human Rights Watch's arms division, said he had not yet been able to discuss with Amnesty its assessment of the video. But he said that any use of cluster bombs "by Egypt or any other fighting force is appalling" and should be condemned.

"That is why they have been banned internationally," he said. "Egypt should cease any use of cluster bombs immediately."

Sinai's Islamic extremists, who are largely confined to the peninsula's northern half, have killed hundreds of Egyptian security officers since the military ousted the country's first democratically elected leader, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, in 2013.

Despite several campaigns aimed at "eradicating" the insurgency, the Egyptian authorities have failed to regain full control over the area. The military's latest operation, which began on Feb. 9, has left at least 82 militants dead and more than 1,800 imprisoned, according to state media.

Security and humanitarian concerns loom over these military efforts both in Egypt and internationally, as human rights advocates and local tribal leaders accuse the military of using scorched-earth tactics that are killing civilians, and radicalizing youths as a result.

The Egyptian government vehemently denies these allegations, but it has refused to lift the news media blackout it imposed on northern Sinai since the unrest began.

Even American officials, legally obliged to ensure that American weapons given as military aid to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government are not being used to violate human rights, have often been denied access.

Tribal leaders in the northern and central parts of the peninsula and human rights advocates say the local population is suffering from shortages of food, electricity and medicine. The authorities also frequently cut off the internet and cell service, and they have shut down schools and universities.

Why Congress Must Vote On The United States' Role In Yemen

By Mike Lee, Bernie Sanders And Chris Murphy
Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Mike Lee, a Republican, represents Utah in the Senate. Bernie Sanders, an independent, represents Vermont in the Senate. Chris Murphy, a Democrat, represents Connecticut in the Senate.

In Yemen, a child under the age of five dies of preventable causes every 10 minutes. That is just one startling fact from a country that has been torn by war for nearly three years.

More than 10,000 civilians have died and over 40,000 have been wounded in this war. Fifteen million people can't access clean water and sanitation. An estimated 17 million people – 60 percent of the total population – do not have reliable access to food and are at risk of starvation.

When tragedies such as the war in Yemen occur, the American people's instinct is to help. Americans have so far provided more than \$768 million in humanitarian aid to that country.

What few Americans know, however, is that the U.S. military is making the crisis worse by helping one side in the conflict bomb innocent civilians. The millions we have spent in humanitarian aid were necessitated, in part, by a U.S. government failure.

In order to understand this failure, we need to understand how the United States got involved in Yemen to begin with. In March 2015, a coalition of Arab forces led by Saudi Arabia launched a military intervention into Yemen.

The goal of this intervention was to support the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi against Houthi insurgents who had taken control of much of the country, including the capital city of Sanaa.

The Obama administration, without consulting Congress, quickly authorized U.S. military forces to provide "logistical and intelligence support" to the Saudi coalition. U.S. military support for this intervention continues to this day. U.S. forces are coordinating, refueling and targeting with the Saudi-led coalition, as confirmed last December by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

We believe that since Congress has not authorized military force for this conflict, the United States should play no role in it beyond providing desperately needed humanitarian aid.

That is why we are introducing a joint resolution that would force Congress to vote on the U.S. war in Yemen. If Congress does not authorize the war, our resolution would require U.S. involvement in Yemen to end.

The Framers gave the power to declare war to Congress, the branch most accountable to the people. Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution states in no uncertain terms that "Congress shall have power to . . . declare war."

It is true that the president may order military operations in limited emergency situations, such as foreign invasions. But the far-off civil war in Yemen, while tragic, is not an emergency.

Under the War Powers Act of 1973, the assignment of a member of the United States armed forces to "command, coordinate, participate in the movement of, or accompany" another country's military during a war constitutes the

introduction of the United States into a conflict. Congress has not authorized these combat activities. Under the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) issued after the 9/11 attacks, any U.S. military action in Yemen must be limited and only directed against groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS, also known as the Islamic State. Engaging in a war against Yemeni Houthi rebels does not qualify.

Indeed, U.S. involvement in the Yemen war has proven counterproductive to the effort against al-Qaeda's affiliates. The State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism for 2016 found that the conflict between Saudi-led forces and the Houthi insurgents had helped AQAP and ISIS's Yemen branch to "deepen their inroads across much of the country." Furthermore, while Iran's support for Houthi insurgents is of serious concern for all of us, the truth is that this war has increased, not decreased, the opportunities for Iranian troublemaking.

The most serious duty we have as U.S. senators is deciding whether and when to send our young women and men into harm's way to defend our country. That is why we are proud to introduce this bipartisan resolution together. Since 9/11, politicians have become far too comfortable with American military interventions all over the world. It is time for Congress to play its constitutionally mandated oversight role with regard to war.

Amid Turkish Assault, Kurdish Forces Are Drawn Away From U.S. Fight With ISIS

By Eric Schmitt And Rod Nordland

New York Times, February 28, 2018

The United States-led campaign to hunt down the last pockets of Islamic State militants in Syria has lost its most effective fighting partner — Kurdish forces that are newly-focused on a Turkish assault — in what American military officials fear will stall a critical phase of the offensive and leave open the door for hundreds of foreign fighters to escape.

Syrian Kurds make up the backbone of a ground force of Kurdish and Arab militia that last fall routed the Islamic State from its self-proclaimed headquarters in Raqqa and chased insurgents fleeing south along the Euphrates River Valley to the Iraqi border. In recent weeks, Kurdish officials have pulled thousands of fighters and commanders from that battle and rushed them to Afrin, in Syria's northwest, where other Kurdish militia are facing sharp attacks from Turkish troops.

That has left behind mostly Syrian Arab fighters to combat the Islamic State, also called ISIS. Arab fighters make up a majority of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F., which would be greatly diminished without the Kurds' military organization and logistical prowess.

In congressional testimony on Tuesday, Gen. Joseph L. Votel, head of United States Central Command, described the S.D.F. as "the most effective force on the ground in Syria against ISIS."

"And we need them to finish this — to finish this fight," General Votel told the House Armed Services Committee.

Without the Kurds, the Arab forces and their American military advisers have largely been forced to halt clearing operations and taken up mostly defensive positions, United States officials said. That has left American air power to pick up the slack.

The development is another major consequence of the fighting that has rapidly unfurled in recent weeks in Syria's tumultuous northwest.

It threatens not only to slow progress against several hundred Islamic State fighters who are hiding along the Euphrates River or in nearby deserts, but also could allow battle-hardened foreign fighters to escape deeper into western Syria and eventually into Turkey or Jordan — and possibly to return home to Europe or Africa to commit mayhem there, American commanders and analysts said.

Thousands of foreign fighters have already fled unfettered to the south and west through Syrian Army lines, these officials said.

"The campaign to defeat the Islamic State is at risk," said Jennifer Cafarella, a senior intelligence planner with the Institute for the Study of War in Washington. "The S.D.F. is unlikely to clear remaining ISIS-held areas of the Euphrates River and could even begin to take losses due to the shift in Syrian Kurds' main effort."

The turn of events has the potential to upset a triumph that President Trump has held out as one of his administration's signature national security accomplishments so far.

"ISIS land has been largely recaptured — almost 100 percent," Mr. Trump said last week during a news conference with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull of Australia. "They are on the run."

Yet senior Trump administration officials and American commanders have been watching, with growing trepidation, as Kurdish troops and commanders divert from the fight against the Islamic State.

Initially, they sought to play down its significance. On Feb. 11, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis called the development "a distraction" and said it was "not a significant number right now."

Maj. Gen. Jamie Jarrard, the Special Operations commander for the American-led coalition in Iraq and Syria, said in an interview in early February that the elimination of the entire caliphate was "very close."

"Anything that disrupts us or takes our eye off that prize is not good," General Jarrard said.

Mr. Mattis, Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson and Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, the White House national security adviser, all have met with Turkish officials in recent days to seek an end to the clashes with Kurdish militia in northwest Syria and prevent the fighting from spreading.

But by last week, Heather Nauert, the State Department's spokeswoman, acknowledged to reporters on Feb. 22 that "we can no longer fight ISIS the way that we would fully like to be able to do."

The diversion of Kurdish fighters and lower-level commanders, who play a pivotal role in directing battlefield operations against the Islamic State, has increased from a trickle to a torrent, according to five American military officials who are monitoring the situation and spoke on condition of anonymity. It is difficult to estimate precisely how many Kurdish fighters have withdrawn.

The Syrian Democratic Forces number about 50,000 Kurdish and Arab fighters throughout eastern and northern Syria, American military officials have said. Several thousand have been fighting the Islamic State in the Euphrates River Valley, with Arabs making up as much as 80 percent of that force, reflecting the demographics of the region.

But as they have elsewhere in the fight against ISIS in Syria, the Kurds have taken on a disproportionate role in front line fighting and command skills, American officials said.

Now some of those gains against the Islamic State are in jeopardy. As of two weeks ago, Kurdish officials said more than 20,000 Kurdish defenders had rallied to Afrin to confront Turkish troops. That number includes fighters who were already there, as well as newly arrived reinforcements.

"The Turkish invasion to occupy Afrin has terribly influenced our fight against ISIS," Shahoz Hasan, co-president of the Syrian Democratic Union party, said in an interview on Monday. "After we managed to get ISIS in a choke hold," he said the Turks "are attacking our forces in that region."

For many Kurdish militia and their commanders, the call to defend family and friends in Afrin and a Kurdish enclave in the city of Manbij that is also threatened by Turkish troops has taken precedence over what many consider to be an American war against the Islamic State.

"Those fighters find it more urgent to be in their areas on the Syrian-Turkish border rather than on the front lines with ISIS," said Arin Sheikhmos, a Kurdish journalist based in Qamishli. The city is the de facto capital of Kurdish areas of northern Syria, which the Kurds call Rojava.

"To them, it is a priority to defend their land rather than liberating others' land," Mr. Sheikhmos said.

The American-led coalition appears to have intensified airstrikes on the Islamic State in areas east of the Euphrates River to fill the battlespace the Kurdish fighters' had left, Mr. Sheikhmos said. The approach was not working, he said.

He said the Islamic State carried out a car bombing in Qamishli a few days ago, resulting in the deaths of four civilians, including a child. It was the first bombing in the city by ISIS in over a year, he said.

Shervan Derwish, a spokesman for the Manbij Military Council, said 250 Kurdish fighters had arrived in the ethnically mixed area in just the past few days. He said they came from Deir al-Zour, an Arab-majority city and former ISIS stronghold in the Euphrates River Valley that is now contested by Russian-backed Syrian government soldiers and the American-backed Arab-Kurdish coalition.

"Unfortunately, our fighters who joined the rest of S.D.F. on the front lines with ISIS in Deir al-Zour had to retreat to Manbij upon hearing the Turkish threats of attacking us here, doing ISIS a favor," Mr. Derwish said. The military council is a Kurdish-led component of the Syrian Democratic Forces in Manbij.

As late as Feb. 8, there were still S.D.F. forces in Deir al-Zour, according to the coalition, which bombed pro-Syrian regime forces who had attacked an S.D.F. base and its American advisers there. The airstrikes, it later turned out, killed dozens of Russian mercenaries in the process, American officials said.

Some analysts, including Ms. Cafarella, have assessed that the Russian-backed attackers gave the Kurdish fighters safe transit to Afrin across government-controlled territory and exploited their departure to strike the less experienced Arab partners in the S.D.F.

Agid Ahmed, commander of the Northern Sun battalion of the Manbij council, said he and his fighters were ordered to return from the front lines in Deir al-Zour on Feb. 6. That, in turn, freed up other S.D.F. fighters defending Manbij to reinforce Afrin. Mr. Ahmed fought with American forces in 10 offensives in northern and eastern Syria, including the retaking of Raqqa from ISIS.

Some of the S.D.F. and Manbij council leaders expressed disappointment with American forces for not preventing last month's Turkish attack on Afrin.

"Americans on the ground do a good job and we learned a lot from them, data sharing, GPS techniques, but politically we're not very sure about them. Especially since the situation in Afrin," said Maher Al Ony, who has four Manbij council brigades — about 2,500 fighters — under his command. "We didn't expect the coalition would allow the Turks to attack Afrin."

Muhammed Abu Adel, the Manbij council's top commander, insisted the commitment to fight ISIS remains strong, even as his forces have left Deir al-Zour.

"We sacrificed thousands of lives of our soldiers, we sacrificed so many to finish ISIS," he said. "And now this, while fighting the most terrible terrorist group, and suddenly there is a state member of NATO come to fight you."

Syrian Government Ground Forces Attack Ghouta Despite Russian Truce Plan

[Reuters](#), February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Putin Is Getting Away With Murder In Syria

[Washington Post](#), February 28, 2018

ONCE AGAIN the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad is conducting a brutal and criminal offensive against its own population, with the support of Russia and Iran. Warplanes have been pounding the suburban Damascus area known as Eastern Ghouta, targeting hospitals, apartment buildings and other civilian sites. In the week that ended last Sunday, relief organizations reported at least 541 people killed and 1,500 wounded. On Sunday, hours after the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution mandating a 30-day cease-fire, the offensive intensified: Ground forces launched an assault on five fronts, and opposition sources reported that chlorine gas had been used in at least one area.

This latest Syrian atrocity has been made possible, like so many before it, by Vladimir Putin. The Russian military is backing the Ghouta offensive, and Russian diplomats ensured that the Security Council resolution meant to stop it was held up for several days, then laced with loopholes providing a pretext for the slaughter to continue. On Monday, Mr. Putin offered, instead of the cease-fire, a daily "humanitarian pause" to allow the evacuation of civilians and entry of aid. Moscow said it would begin on Tuesday, but — to the surprise of virtually no one — no such action was taken. Instead, the assault goes on.

Syria has become a maelstrom of war that has sucked in half a dozen outside powers, including the United States, which has some 2,000 troops deployed in the country. But most of the conflict is waged, supported or manipulated by Mr. Putin, who aspires to use Syria to reestablish Russia as a Mideast power at the expense of the United States. In addition to aiding and abetting the scorched-earth campaigns of the Assad regime, the Kremlin appears to have signed off on a Feb. 7 attack by irregular Russian forces on U.S. and allied positions near the Euphrates River in eastern Syria. The assault was rebuffed with heavy Russian losses, but it showed Moscow's audacity in risking a direct U.S.-Russian conflict.

Russia has suffered several recent reverses in Syria: not just the bloody nose on the Euphrates but the collapse of a unilateral attempt to broker a peace settlement outside the long-standing U.N. diplomatic process. Yet Mr. Putin does not appear chastened. Now he is openly defying the Security Council while helping the Assad regime to overrun a region populated by 390,000 people by bombing hospitals and

deploying chemical weapons. He shows no interest in the U.N. negotiations, which call for the formation of a new Syrian government acceptable to all sides, followed by free elections.

After months of hesitation, the Trump administration recently outlined a policy for Syria that supports the U.N. process and calls for eliminating terrorist groups; officials say U.S. troops will remain in the country, which provides Washington with some diplomatic leverage. But Mr. Putin eschews cooperation with Washington. Instead, he is doing his best to bluff and intimidate President Trump into ordering a withdrawal. In the absence of a firm U.S. response to its latest outrages — and so far there is no sign of one — the Kremlin is unlikely to change course.

EU, U.S. Officials Plan Berlin Talks On Iran Nuclear Deal: Source

[Reuters](#), February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Saudi Crown Prince's Visit To U.S. To Include Several Cities: Source

[Reuters](#), February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Why A Two-state Solution For Israel And The Palestinians Is Closer Than You Think

By Ami Ayalon, Gilead Sher And Orni Petruschka

[Washington Post](#), February 28, 2018

As President Trump welcomes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House next week, opinions have never been more dour about the possibility of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The Trump administration says it is working on a plan, but its intended transfer of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and its open criticism of Palestinians' quest for statehood have driven the Arabs from the bargaining table. Meanwhile, support for a two-state solution has slipped to 46 percent among Israelis and Palestinians, and each population votes for politicians who oppose a deal. Likud, the party leading Israel, says it is uninterested in negotiating. (Indeed, many of its members and their coalition partners say they prefer various schemes to annex substantial parts of the West Bank.) Netanyahu is facing corruption allegations that could remove him from office, but a successor would probably commit to the same positions.

Yet things are not as hopeless as they seem. A survey last month by Tel Aviv University's Tami Steinmetz Center for

Peace Research and the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, suggests that the Trump administration could devise a plan both publics could support. For those committed to Israel's security and character as a Jewish and democratic state, the survey's finding that "both sides prefer the two-state solution to all other conflict resolution options" gives several reasons for optimism.

The poll identifies concrete policy incentives that, if added to the basic terms of plans put forward over the past 18 years, would dramatically increase support for a new proposal. For example, 44 percent of Israeli Jews who oppose a two-state solution would change their minds if the Palestinian government commits to maintaining Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, including sharing intelligence with Israeli security forces, preventing attacks and arresting terrorism suspects. Adding this element to a peace plan would increase Israeli support from 46 to 59 percent.

Among Palestinians who are opposed, 39 percent would change their minds and support an agreement if Israel recognized the "Nakba," the exodus of Palestinians who fled or were expelled from their homes in 1948 during what Israel calls its War of Independence, as well as the suffering of these refugees, and if Israel provides compensation to them. (This does not require Israel to grant the refugees a right of return to Israel, a justifiable dealbreaker for Israelis.) Including this provision in a plan would boost Palestinian backing to 62 percent.

Some incentives appeal to both sides. The most noteworthy ones, which would also advance U.S. interests, involve a regional approach. Making the Israeli-Palestinian agreement part of the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative would change the minds of 37 percent of Israelis and 24 percent of Palestinians who originally opposed an agreement. And including formal guarantees by the United States, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which would create a joint commission to ensure proper implementation by both sides, would induce 39 percent of Israeli Jews who initially opposed the agreement to support it and 27 percent of Palestinians to do likewise.

A third component that appeals to both sides: ensuring that Palestine would be a democracy. This would change the minds of 40 percent of Israeli Jews and 37 percent of Palestinians to support an agreement.

In a Catch-22 finding, the most significant reason people oppose a two-state solution is their perception that it is not feasible. So, if the Trump administration's plan is demonstrably realistic and feasible, Palestinians and Israelis will support it.

These findings demonstrate that flexibility and open attitudes still exist on both sides and that the right policies can reverse rejection of a two-state package by Israelis and Palestinians. Both sides have shown a complete absence of political courage for a decade, and if the Trump administration hopes to surmount this cowardice, it will need

proposals that allow the leaders to attract popular support while still making hard choices.

Still, progress is unlikely until the White House rehabilitates relations with the Palestinian leadership and repairs the damage caused by the Jerusalem declaration. That requires a fair and balanced plan, including terms referring to the Jerusalem area as hosting capitals of both states with a special regime over the Old City.

If Trump's team uses the survey's findings to carefully craft a plan that will garner the support of a majority of people on both sides, and regionally, the administration may well find that the people will drag their recalcitrant, spineless leaders into a process gradually leading to two states for two peoples. Even if it does not result in an ultimate, final-status deal, that would still be a historic achievement.

U.S. Banks On Diplomacy With North Korea, But Moves Ahead On Military Plans

By Helene Cooper And Eric Schmitt

New York Times, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — A classified military exercise last week examined how American troops would mobilize and strike if ordered into a potential war on the Korean Peninsula, even as diplomatic overtures between the North and the Trump administration continue.

The war planning, known as a "tabletop exercise," was held over several days in Hawaii. It included Gen. Mark A. Milley, the Army's chief of staff, and Gen. Tony Thomas, the head of Special Operations Command.

They looked at a number of pitfalls that could hamper an American assault on North Korea's well-entrenched military. Among them was the Pentagon's limited ability to evacuate injured troops from the Korean Peninsula daily — a problem more acute if the North retaliated with chemical weapons, according to more than a half-dozen military and Defense Department officials familiar with the exercise.

Large numbers of surveillance aircraft would have to be moved from the Middle East and Africa to the Pacific to support ground troops. Planners also looked at how American forces stationed in South Korea and Japan would be involved.

Pentagon officials cautioned that the planning does not mean that a decision has been made to go to war over President Trump's demands that North Korea rein in its nuclear ambitions.

A war with North Korea, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has said, would be "catastrophic." He and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have argued forcefully for using diplomacy to address Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Commanders who attended the exercise in Hawaii were told that roughly 10,000 Americans could be wounded in

combat in the opening days alone. And the number of civilian casualties, the generals were told, would likely be in the thousands or even hundreds of thousands.

The potential human costs of a war were so high that, at one point during the exercise, General Milley remarked that "the brutality of this will be beyond the experience of any living soldier," according to officials who were involved.

So, too, would be the sheer logistical enterprise of moving thousands of American soldiers and equipment to the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, senior military officials worry that after 17 years in Afghanistan and Iraq, American troops have become far more used to counterinsurgency fighting than a land war against a state, as an attack on North Korea would likely bring.

But Mr. Mattis also has ordered top Pentagon leaders to be ready for any possible military action against North Korea. Already, ammunition has been pre-staged in the Pacific region for ground units.

And Mr. Trump's words — "Military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely," he said in an August post on Twitter — have left senior officers and rank-and-file troops convinced that they need to accelerate their contingency planning.

A White House decision to attack is almost wholly dependent on cooperation from South Korea — not only in committing its troops or other assets to the battle but also accepting the risk of widespread bloodshed on its civilian population if the North fires back.

With a revival recently signaled on the long-dormant diplomatic track to resolve the Korean crisis, Pentagon officials said they did not want to disrupt any chance for a negotiated resolution. North Korea's declaration at the end of the Winter Olympics that it was willing to open a dialogue with the United States offered a small amount of hope that the political pageantry of the Games would lead to more substantial results.

Mr. Trump's response that the United States, too, was interested in talking compounded that hope. "We want to talk also," Mr. Trump said earlier this week, but "only under the right conditions."

But Trump administration officials still insist that the United States will not sit with North Korea unless Pyongyang agrees to open negotiations on its nuclear program, a condition the North has rejected.

And so the planning continues.

Mr. Mattis and other senior military leaders fear that a stray incident could spark a sudden conflict with the North. Of particular concern is the "ladder of escalation" — a chain of actions prompted by the shooting down of a North Korean or American jet, or sinking of a ship of which Mr. Mattis and other Pentagon leaders could quickly lose control.

Harsh new sanctions that the Trump administration announced last week are a prime example.

The economic penalties target 28 ships that are registered in China and seven other countries, and intend to further cut off North Korea's imports of oil and exports of coal. But by going after the shipments, the United States is edging closer to the imposition of an economic blockade on the North.

While Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin stopped short of saying the United States Navy would forcibly board ships on the high seas, administration officials privately have said that sailors may yet be called upon to do so, if hostile foreign vessels are suspected of transporting certain material to North Korea.

That, Defense Department officials say, could easily spark an incident that could escalate.

Mr. Trump recently referred to another type of incident that American officials fear could spark a war.

During a speech in Seoul last year, he brought up North Korea's 1969 downing an American spy plane that had been flying over the Sea of Japan. All 31 Americans aboard were killed in the attack by two North Korean MiGs.

At the time, President Richard M. Nixon chose not to retaliate. It is unclear if Mr. Trump would follow the same course; in bringing up the episode last year, he warned, "Do not underestimate us, and do not try us."

The Hawaii planning exercise looked at a wide range of military capabilities and missions. They included:

- How many conventional and Special Operations forces could be deployed, in phases, to target North Korean nuclear sites.
- Whether the Army's 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions could be charged with fighting in tunnels.
- Exhaustive plans to take down North Korea's integrated air defenses, allowing American manned and unmanned aircraft into the reclusive country.
- Plans for the morbid but necessary details of personnel recovery plans, such as if pilots are shot down, and the evacuation of the dead and wounded.

In a meeting on Monday in "the Tank" — a secured space in the Pentagon where the Joint Chiefs of Staff discuss top-secret issues — General Milley told senior military leaders about the exercise but did not outline details of the war plans, officials said. The Army holds around eight tabletop exercises every year for different countries and scenarios.

In April, a larger meeting is being planned between Mr. Mattis and the global combatant commanders. It is one of the periodic meetings that Mr. Mattis has with the top military brass, but is expected to heavily focus on North Korea.

Special Operations forces have been briefed on some details of a plan that is separate but related to a potential strike on North Korea, officials said. However, Special Operations forces have yet to change course from their current operations.

Although the planning is continuing apace, a military operation against North Korea has yet to be given a formal name. Special Operations units, however, have already been assigned to specific task forces with names such as Trident and Falcon.

The Legal Case For Striking North Korea First

Does the necessity of self-defense leave 'no choice of means, and no moment of deliberation'?

By John Bolton

Wall Street Journal, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

China's Censors Ban Winnie The Pooh And The Letter 'N' After Xi's Power Grab

By Javier C. Hernández

New York Times, February 28, 2018

BEIJING — Liu Jin, a 27-year-old teacher in central China, is the kind of young nationalist that President Xi Jinping can typically count on. Mr. Liu shares propaganda photos of the president in battle fatigues online and reverently calls him "Uncle Xi."

But Mr. Liu was dismayed this week when he heard that the ruling Communist Party was changing the Chinese Constitution, allowing Mr. Xi to stay in power indefinitely.

"I disagree," Mr. Liu wrote on Weibo, a microblogging site, listing examples of power-hungry emperors and autocrats. Censors immediately deleted the post.

During his more than five years in power, Mr. Xi has cultivated an image as a man of the people — a centered, sympathetic leader who lines up with workers to buy pork buns while also guiding the world's most populous nation to growth and global influence.

But the move to abolish term limits, announced on Sunday, has resurrected deeper fears in Chinese society, where memories remain of the personality cult of China's founding father, Mao Zedong, and the fevered emotions and chaos that it conjured.

Anxious to suppress criticism, and maintain an appearance of mass support, the Communist Party's censors have scoured the internet and social media for content deemed subversive. The sanitizing has included many images of Winnie the Pooh — Mr. Xi is sometimes likened to the cartoon bear — and search terms like "my emperor," "lifelong" and "shameless."

For a short time, even the English letter "N" was censored, according to Victor Mair, a University of Pennsylvania professor, apparently to pre-empt social scientists from expressing dissent mathematically: $N > 2$, with "N" being the number of Mr. Xi's terms in office.

In their coverage, China's state-run media have played down the move, as if in hopes that most Chinese simply will

not notice, or care. When news accounts mention the change, they argue that term limits should be eliminated to ensure leadership continuity at a time when China has ambitions to challenge American dominance and reclaim its rightful place on the global stage. "China cannot stop and take a break," the nationalistic Global Times warned. "The country must seize the day, seize the hour."

Despite the blanket of censorship, and the fear that many expressed in stating their actual opinions in public, some cracks have appeared in the facade of public unity behind China's strongman.

Retirees who endured the trauma of Mao's Cultural Revolution are warning of a return to dictatorship. University students are posting quotes from George Washington's farewell address online. Business executives, concerned about the Communist Party's growing grip on private enterprises, are hastening plans to relocate overseas.

Li Datong, a former journalist and critic of the government, has circulated an open letter calling on the Communist Party to block Mr. Xi's plan or risk "once again planting seeds of chaos in China and causing untold damage." He said that Mr. Xi's power grab would overturn the very stable and predictable system for peaceful transitions of power set up decades ago after the chaos of Mao and succession struggles under Deng Xiaoping.

"It's going to break the chains placed on the system," Mr. Li said in an interview. "It's going to be very dangerous."

While some have likened Mr. Xi to Mao, others reached further into Chinese history, comparing Mr. Xi to Yuan Shikai, an early 20th-century warlord who briefly restored China's monarchy with himself as emperor.

For all the discontent, analysts said it was unlikely anything would block Mr. Xi's attempts to extend his rule.

For one, much of the frustration over the term-limits plan is limited to the urban elite. Mr. Xi remains immensely popular among farmers and blue-collar workers, as well as a new generation of young nationalists, who admire what they view as his steely drive and see him as the architect of China's ascent in the 21st century.

"It's not a bad thing to remove term limits, so long as the leader has strong abilities," said one such supporter, Mou Yuxiu, 19, a college freshman in the southwestern province of Sichuan. "President Xi is such a person."

For another, Mr. Xi already has an iron grip on Chinese society. A sweeping anti-corruption campaign has ensnared tens of thousands of officials, and imposed discipline on the Communist Party and other powerful institutions like the People's Liberation Army, China's military. There have also been conspicuously public arrests of lawyers and dissidents, including Gui Minhai, a Hong Kong-based publisher who has been in custody for more than two years, apparently for publishing books critical of Mr. Xi and China.

While the plan to abolish term limits may be one of the most important political decisions in decades, many citizens are simply unaware of it. The decision has been buried inside newspapers and mentioned only in passing on television news shows.

"I didn't pay much attention to the change," said Peng Man, a worker from the countryside now living in Beijing. "It's a good thing if they are good officials. It's bad thing, if they are not good officials."

But for others, Mr. Xi's maneuvering has rekindled memories of the Cultural Revolution, the decade-long upheaval instigated by Mao that fractured Chinese society and left more than one million dead.

Many see echoes of Mao's obsession with power in Mr. Xi, who has placed the ideal of absolute loyalty to the party at the center of everyday life. Like Mao, Mr. Xi has also filled China's society with political slogans, and used propaganda to present himself as the leader needed to guide China to its destiny.

Critics argue that by putting such a personal stamp on power, and eliminating the previous collective leadership model, Mr. Xi is setting the stage for a return to the excesses of personal loyalty and fanaticism that nearly tore China apart during Mao's time.

"Many people inside and outside the system went through the Mao era and their anxiety is intensified," said Zhang Lifan, a historian in Beijing, whose father, a government official, was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

Others harbor nostalgia for the politics of the Cultural Revolution, which they see as a time of decisiveness and ideological purity. They dismiss criticism of Mr. Xi's strongman tendencies, saying centralized power is a sign of prosperity and stability.

"Xi Jinping can explore a new mass democracy in his own way, without the chaos, disorder and blood, and without the darkness and negatives," said Zhang Hongliang, a Maoist commentator. "Centralized power is just a tool. What matters is who holds it."

Mr. Xi has presented himself as a singular figure who has what it takes to eliminate corruption, reduce income inequality and extend China's influence in the world.

"Chinese people are addicts to the veneer of strong purposeful stability, and Xi exemplifies that," said Kerry Brown, a China scholar at King's College, London.

While gauging public opinion in an authoritarian country is difficult, surveys suggest Mr. Xi has an approval rating of more than 80 percent. In interviews, many praise him for maintaining robust economic growth at a time when more advanced nations have faltered, and challenging America's dominance in areas like the South China Sea.

But even many of Mr. Xi's admirers have been taken aback by his bid for indefinite rule. Some worry that he might

upset the peaceful transitions of power that have brought stability.

"More mistakes can be made if the term is longer," said Shi Jin, 45, a stay-at-home mother in Beijing.

Others are now looking to leave China, and immigration agencies are seizing the moment to advertise their services.

Wu Dan, a graphic designer, said she had received four calls from immigration agents this week. She said she had decided against it, even though she disagreed with the plan to abolish term limits.

"As a patriotic young person, I hope our country can have fewer people who are starving, our government can think for the people and our media can speak for the people," Ms. Wu said. "I still hope our government will make the right decision by reflecting on history."

In Taiwan, Young Protesters And Ex-Presidents Chafe Against China

By Chris Horton

New York Times, February 28, 2018

TAIPEI, Taiwan — In very different ways on Wednesday, citizens of Taiwan used an important holiday to call for the 23 million people of this self-governing island — which Beijing claims as its territory — to have a greater say in their political identity.

Young protesters in the northern city of Taoyuan, carrying an anti-China banner, splashed red paint on the tomb of Chiang Kai-shek, the generalissimo who fled to Taiwan after losing China's civil war to the Communists and who declared martial law on the island that lasted until 1987, 12 years after his death.

And at a news conference in Taipei, the capital, two former presidents called for a referendum in April 2019 on whether to replace the Republic of China, which has been the island's government since 1945, with a Republic of Taiwan — a move that Beijing has warned would lead to war.

Both developments on Wednesday — the 71st anniversary of an uprising that led to a massacre of Taiwanese by Chiang's soldiers — highlight the challenges that President Tsai Ing-wen faces in dealing with rising pressure from China while trying to keep Taiwan's pro-independence voters on her side as midterm elections approach.

Video footage of the demonstration at Chiang's tomb on Wednesday showed chanting protesters throwing red paint and unfurling a white banner that read, "Abolish China authoritarian rule, establish the Republic of Taiwan." Mausoleum staff politely asked them to stop, to little avail.

In past years, statues of Chiang have been defaced on the anniversary of what has become known as the 2/28 Incident — a public uprising that began on Feb. 28, 1947, and

was crushed by Nationalist soldiers, who killed tens of thousands of Taiwanese.

While Chiang is still revered as a strong leader by some older residents, many in Taiwan oppose the use of his likeness or name in public spaces. Statues of Chiang, once ubiquitous in Taiwan, are gradually being moved to a park in Taoyuan. Many support the removal of Chiang's likeness from Taiwan's currency and of his name from roads and schools, as well as the repurposing of Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, one of Taipei's biggest tourist sites.

Mainland China's ruling Communist Party has warned Taiwan against such "de-Chiang-ification." They see it as an attempt to eradicate the Chinese identity that Chiang and the Nationalists, also known as the Kuomintang, imposed on Taiwan, which before their arrival in 1945 had been under Japanese colonial rule for 50 years.

A public vote on declaring a Republic of Taiwan, as the two former presidents called for on Wednesday, would be considered a much graver matter. Beijing has said that establishing such a republic would prompt it to invade.

Under Taiwan's Constitution, issues like sovereignty cannot be decided by public referendum. But even a nonbinding vote in favor of a Republic of Taiwan would put pressure on Ms. Tsai to take a more confrontational stance with the mainland, while giving Beijing more fodder with which to justify its own increasing pressure on her government. But voters in Taiwan have shown a tendency to push back against threats from the mainland.

Ms. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party has traditionally favored independence, but as president she has shelved that goal in favor of maintaining the status quo and is unlikely to support the referendum proposal.

Lee Teng-hui, one of the former presidents backing the proposal, told hundreds of supporters at a news conference that a referendum was the "most powerful weapon" that Taiwan could use to establish itself as a "normal country," according to Taiwan's Central News Agency. Mr. Lee, now 95, bemoaned the fact that Taiwan cannot participate in numerous international organizations, due in large part to China's attempts to isolate it.

Mr. Lee, a mentor of Ms. Tsai, won Taiwan's first democratic presidential election in 1996, amid threats of war from China that led to the deployment of United States carrier groups to the Taiwan Strait.

Joining Mr. Lee in supporting the referendum was former President Chen Shui-bian, 67, who is on medical parole from a 20-year prison sentence for corruption. Speaking in a recorded video, Mr. Chen struck a defiant tone.

"Taiwan is our country, not China's," the Central News Agency quoted Mr. Chen as saying. "We have to use our right to vote to show the world Taiwan's will and determination that the country will never concede to the control of the Communist Party of China."

Ms. Tsai made no public mention on Wednesday of the referendum proposal or the protest at Chiang's tomb. On Twitter, she commemorated the 1947 uprising and said the government would continue to investigate abuses committed under Kuomintang's rule.

"Today we commemorate the lives that perished during the 228 Incident 71 yrs ago," she wrote. "Only when we reconcile w/ the past, can we move forward together."

We Got China Wrong. Now What?

By Charles Lane

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Remember how American engagement with China was going to make that communist backwater more like the democratic, capitalist West?

For years, both Republican and Democratic administrations argued that the gravitational pull of U.S.-dominated international institutions, trade flows, even pop culture, would gradually reshape the People's Republic, resulting in a moderate new China with which the United States and its Asian allies could comfortably coexist.

Well, Chinese President Xi Jinping has just engineered his potential elevation to president for life. This is the latest proof — along with China's rampant theft of U.S. intellectual property, its military buildup in the South China Sea and Xi's touting of Chinese-style illiberal state capitalism as "a new option for other countries" — that the powers-that-be in Beijing have their own agenda, impervious to U.S. influence.

"We in the U.S. foreign policy community have remained deeply invested in expectations about China . . . even as evidence against them has accumulated," two self-critical ex-Obama administration Asia hands, Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, admit in the current issue of Foreign Affairs magazine.

If there had been more such candor earlier, we might not have President Trump, whose rise owes much to a public backlash against the perceived costs — especially in jobs lost to Chinese imports — of the erstwhile bipartisan China policy consensus.

Trump's approach to China, a weird mix of open pleading for help with North Korea, fawning praise for Xi and threatened punitive tariffs on Chinese goods, hardly seems calculated to lay the basis for a more sustainable policy.

The United States needs a long, sober policy rethink. Step one: Remember that friendlier ties with Beijing seemed like a good idea, even a brilliant one, when then-likely presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon first proposed it during the Cold War, also in the pages of Foreign Affairs, half a century ago.

Geopolitically, Mao Zedong's China was isolated and adrift, hostile to both the Soviet Union and the United States. Nixon rationally supposed that the United States could benefit by drawing closer to Beijing and using it as a counterweight to

the greater threat of Moscow. And he acted on this after becoming president in 1969.

Subsequent presidents preserved Nixon's policy and expanded upon it, even after one of its basic assumptions, the permanence of the Soviet empire, proved wrong, much to the experts' astonishment.

American foreign-policy thinkers did not, however, take the end of the Cold War as a cue to back away from what had started as a marriage of anti-Soviet convenience, even after Beijing proved its brutality in the massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Instead, the Cold War's dramatic end spawned a new and loftier rationale for the policy, which had acquired a life of its own. Americans believed that history might be flowing inevitably in favor of free markets and free elections. All we had to do was stay patient, maintain our influence and let China evolve. There would be no long-term conflict between U.S. self-interest and U.S. values.

The fact that this also happened to be the position most congenial to American business, hungry for access to China's cheap labor, seemed like a feature, not a bug.

Now it's evident China has been gaining leverage over the political and economic leaders of the United States, and has learned how to make them defer to its norms.

Just ask Apple chief executive Tim Cook, who has obeyed a Chinese legal mandate to store individual Chinese iCloud customers' data in the communist state, where authorities can demand access. This is the company whose TV ad during the 1984 Super Bowl touted Apple products as the alternative to Orwellian dystopia.

As for geopolitics, the old Nixon-Kissinger gambit is played out, and increasingly Moscow and Beijing cooperate to counter the United States, whether in the Middle East or the Korean Peninsula.

It's possible that Xi has overreached politically and that his new power grab will galvanize his enemies, leading to new political instability within China, accompanied by a meltdown of the country's rickety financial system. In that case, the United States' challenge will be to contain the damage to the rest of the world.

In the likelier event that China continues to rise, the United States will face a choice: We can try to beat China at its own games — raw geopolitics and mercantilist economics — as Trump seems to prefer. Or we can play to our historic strengths, shoring up our domestic democratic and capitalist institutions, and re-investing in traditional alliances with democratic nations in the Asia-Pacific region.

If there's one clear lesson from the past 50 years of U.S. policy toward China, it's that nothing is inevitable in international politics, or irreversible. From now on, the United States must act accordingly.

Turkey's Erdogan Wants To Make Adultery A Crime

By Jason Rezaian

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

The growing rift between Turkey and Europe could have an unexpected side effect: making adultery a crime for Turks.

On Feb. 20, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that his country should criminalize adultery in conjunction with a drive to increase penalties on child abuse. "Those who commit these crimes must be excluded from the possibility of reduced sentences. Wounds inflicted on society are the same as killing a person," Erdogan said, according to Turkey's Hurriyet Daily News. "By making a regulation on adultery, all of those abuses would be considered within the same scope," he added.

Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, or AKP, had tried to make adultery illegal in 2004 (it had been officially criminalized from 1926 to 1996), but the proposal was scrapped after it sparked a battle with the European Union and threatened talks about Turkey's bid to join the union. Those talks have all but collapsed since a 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan and his subsequent crackdowns and purges of perceived enemies.

Erdogan said he now considers bowing to European pressure a mistake. "This society holds a different status in terms of its moral values," he said at an AKP meeting last week. "This is an issue where Turkey is different from most Western countries." Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said on Feb. 21 that Turkey's justice ministry is drafting a regulation on adultery.

Turkey's government was once a bastion of secularism, enforcing measures that kept religion firmly out of public life. But Erdogan and the AKP have made a long series of moves to consolidate their power and give Islam more influence in government and society. Erdogan and his supporters say these policies are a reflection of the values and attitudes of Turkish society, and experts agree that Erdogan would be unlikely to push such a move if he did not think it would receive broad support.

"Erdogan has an Islamist flank that people sometimes forget about. He has to keep them happy," Nicholas Danforth, a senior analyst at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, told The Washington Post. He pointed out that the AKP can be pragmatic on religious issues, citing the government's decision to raise alcohol taxes rather than ban alcohol outright. "The AKP is reportedly attentive to its own polling in anticipating how policy decisions will be received," Danforth said.

But moves to roll back the judicial clock aren't merely about political expediency, said Soner Cagaptay, the director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute

for Near East Policy. "This is really Erdogan," he said. "In his heart he believes adultery needs to be punished."

Senate Revives NATO Observer Mission After Decade-long Hiatus

By Karoun Demirjian

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Senators are resuscitating an observer mission to NATO that has been defunct for over a decade in the latest effort from Congress to affirm its commitment for the nearly 70-year-old alliance at a time when the president's support for it is in question.

Sens. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) and Thom Tillis (R-N.C.) announced the reconfiguration of the Senate NATO Observer Group on Wednesday afternoon, stressing that Senate leaders, senior officials from the State and Defense departments, as well as U.S. Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison, were fully behind the effort.

But the senators said they had not yet secured the express buy-in of the White House and President Trump — whose own comments about traditional security alliances such as NATO have not always been in lockstep with those of his administration.

Discussions about reviving the observer group, which was first constituted in 1997 to help lawmakers stay engaged in plans to expand NATO into Eastern Europe but has not been in existence since 2007, began in earnest late last summer, just a few months after Trump's first trip to Brussels, where he met with the leaders of NATO member states. While there, Trump scolded allies for not budgeting more toward their defense obligations to the alliance, and he held back making an unconditional endorsement of Article 5: that an attack on one NATO member would be treated as an attack on all.

Since then, the Senate has taken steps to demonstrate the United States' commitment to NATO, such as adopting an amendment reaffirming support for Article 5 in a bill stepping up sanctions against Russia and Iran. But Shaheen said Wednesday that when in Munich in February to attend an international security conference, she heard fewer concerns from NATO allies about U.S. commitment to the organization.

"I didn't hear from people on this trip that there were the same questions about where the United States was going to be with respect to NATO. . . . It was more of a discussion of how we're going to go forward together," she said.

"I think the fact that we had assistant secretary [A. Wess] Mitchell is an indication that the administration supports this effort," Shaheen added, referring to the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, who came to Capitol Hill with Supreme Allied Commander of Europe Gen. Curtis Scaparotti to join

Shaheen and Tillis on Wednesday to announce the new observer mission.

Tillis also noted that the high-ranking administration officials backing the effort show "that we clearly have the support of the administration and I think we'll build on it."

The observer mission is currently made up of 10 members of the Senate, but there are no limits on how big it can become. Present members include the chairmen and ranking members of the Senate Foreign Relations, Armed Services, Intelligence, and defense appropriations committees, as well as Shaheen and Tillis, who will co-chair. Other members will be selected by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), and likely appointed in bipartisan pairs.

The group plans to make several trips to NATO allies "and make it very clear to them America's commitment is strong," Tillis said.

He and Shaheen added that the observer mission could play an important role in educating senators not on national security panels about the need to support NATO through increased appropriations and other legislative means — particularly in the face of terrorism, cyberthreats and Russian aggression.

"We're building on what I think has been a remarkable year: increased participation, financial participation," Tillis said, referencing how several NATO members had increased their defense contributions to the alliance. NATO members are expected to try to devote 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense by 2024.

"There's a lot of positive momentum I think we can build on," Tillis added, predicting that the administration would take steps "in the coming weeks" to step up sanctions against Russia.

Northern Ireland Has Become An Unexpected Hurdle For Brexit

By William Booth

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

LONDON — In the days of the Troubles, as the 30-year sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland was known, the borderlands between the North and the Republic of Ireland were called "bandit country" — a frontier of milk smugglers, gun runners and frequent clashes between British soldiers and Irish Republican Army cells.

Today, because the sides made peace and because both the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland are members of the same European Union, the border between them is wide-open to the point of invisibility. Manufactured goods, alongside 110,000 people, and a lot of sheep and Guinness stout, pass freely on a daily basis, without customs checks or passport control, over new highways, farm roads and country lanes.

But that border is now a major point of contention in the Brexit debate, as Britain and the E.U. sort out how to disengage next year.

European negotiators on Wednesday released draft language for a treaty that would have Northern Ireland essentially remain in the E.U. customs union, which would allow for an open border for trade and travel between Northern Ireland, still a part of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland in the south, a member of the European bloc.

In Parliament, Prime Minister Theresa May immediately called the proposal unacceptable, signaling a rocky road ahead.

May said the Brussels draft would "undermine the U.K. common market and threaten the constitutional integrity of the U.K. by creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish Sea, and no U.K. prime minister could ever agree to it."

Presenting the proposed treaty, Brussels's chief negotiator Michel Barnier said that Europe was open to other suggestions, but that it must preserve the open border. He signaled that Europe needed to hear clear answers from May and that time was running out.

This vexing issue of the Irish border was hardly mentioned before Britain's historic June 2016 vote to leave the European Union.

But the balance between Republicans and Unionists, and between north and south on the Irish island, remains fragile and unsettled 20 years after the sectarian violence ended with the Good Friday Agreement.

May is squeezed by the border issue in part because she failed to achieve a majority in the last British elections and so had to enter into a soft coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland, made of Protestants loyal to Britain and the monarch, who oppose any move that would sever ties with the United Kingdom.

The DUP leader in Parliament, Nigel Dodds, on Wednesday described the latest E.U. proposals as "ludicrous" and said if enacted, the treaty would be "catastrophic" for Northern Ireland.

"We did not leave the European Union to oversee the breakup of the United Kingdom," he told the BBC.

The conservative Times of London wrote, "The European Union has demanded that Britain effectively hand over sovereignty of Northern Ireland to Brussels if it cannot find a solution to the Irish border question."

Meanwhile, the Republic of Ireland's Foreign Minister Simon Coveney praised the draft language.

May has suggested that the Irish border issue can be finessed with a combo of clever compromise and 21st-century technology, but she has not said how.

The question of what to do about the border was dismissed this week as a nonissue by hard-line Brexiteers in

May's cabinet, foremost by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, who on Tuesday suggested the solution was no more complex than arranging cameras along the frontier to take pictures of license plate numbers passing by, to collect tolls and information.

He compared the Irish border to moving between two boroughs in London, between zones where traffic tolls are taken to reduce congestion and pollution in the city's center. Johnson's comments, criticized as glib and ahistorical, angered both sides of the Irish border.

Returning from a morning jog (and publicity stunt) in the snow, Johnson, a former London mayor, told reporters Wednesday, "What is going on at the moment is that the issue of the Northern Irish border is being used quite a lot politically to try to keep the U.K. in the customs union, effectively the single market, so we cannot really leave the E.U. That is what is going on."

Earlier this week, Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party and the opposition in Parliament, said he supported a softer Brexit that could include a custom union with Europe on trade and tariffs — an arrangement that could preserve an open Irish border, but would block Britain from making its own bilateral deals abroad. May dismissed the idea.

The prime minister is scheduled to present the government's vision for Brexit in a major speech on Friday.

NATIONAL NEWS

Trump Stuns Lawmakers With Seeming Embrace Of Gun Control Measures

By Michael D. Shear

New York Times, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Wednesday repeatedly embraced a series of gun control measures, telling a group of lawmakers at the White House to pursue bills that have been opposed for years by the vast majority of the Republican Party and the National Rifle Association.

In a remarkable televised meeting in the Cabinet Room, the president appeared to stun giddy Democrats and stone-faced Republicans by calling for comprehensive gun control that would expand background checks, keep guns from the mentally ill, secure schools and restrict gun sales from some young adults.

To the surprise of many in the room, Mr. Trump urged the bipartisan lawmakers to start with a bipartisan bill put forward in 2013 by Senators Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, a Democrat, and Patrick J. Toomey of Pennsylvania, a Republican. That bill died months after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., after intense Republican opposition.

Mr. Trump repeatedly suggested that the dynamics had changed, in part because of his leadership in the White

House, a sentiment that the Democrats in the room readily agreed with as they saw the president supporting their ideas.

"It would be so beautiful to have one bill that everyone could support," Mr. Trump said as Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, sat smiling to his left. "It's time that a president stepped up."

Trump To Lawmakers: "I'll Love You" If Action Is Taken On Gun Legislation

By Thomas McKinless

Roll Call (DC), February 28, 2018

President Donald Trump hosted a bipartisan group of lawmakers at the White House

for a discussion on legislation to prevent mass shootings. He told lawmakers if they combine their various gun-related measures into a bill in the ballpark of the ideas he endorsed on Wednesday, he "will sign it."

Trump Asks Congress For Broad Bill On Guns, Schools After Shooting

By Ayesha Rascoe, Roberta Rampton

Reuters, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Trump: Bill Combining Concealed Carry And Gun Background Checks Will 'Never Pass'

By Ayanna Alexander

Politico, February 28, 2018

President Donald Trump on Wednesday cast doubt on the political prospects for expanding concealed-carry gun laws, telling a bipartisan group of lawmakers that including the gun-lobby priority in legislation related to background checks would sink it in Congress.

Rep. Steve Scalise (R-La.), the House majority whip, spoke up during a White House meeting in favor of a House Republican plan that combines a background-check measure with a provision that would make concealed-carry permits valid across state lines.

But the president dismissed the idea, saying "it'll never pass."

Trump convened the meeting to discuss ways to prevent attacks like the Feb. 14 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, that killed 17 people.

The House already passed the combined legislation, but its chances are poor in the Senate due to Democrats' opposition.

Scalise had supported passage of the Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act last year.

"If you look at the concealed carry population, these are people by and large who are helping us stop crime, so I hope

that that's not immediately dismissed because there is a lot of talk to just putting that on the side," he said on Wednesday. Scalise was critically wounded in a shooting during a practice for the congressional baseball game last summer.

Though Trump didn't completely rule out Scalise's proposal, he suggested it be passed as a separate bill.

"I think that maybe that bill will someday pass, but it should pass as separate," the president said. "If you're gonna put concealed carry between states in this bill, we're talking about a whole new ballgame. And I'm with you, but let it be a separate bill. If you add conceal carry to this, you'll never get it passed."

Trump Calls For Quick Action On School Safety, Guns

By Lisa Mascaro And Matthew Daly

Associated Press, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Wednesday that Congress should act quickly on gun laws as he convened lawmakers at the White House and pushed for tougher background checks, better school safety and more mental health resources to prevent shootings.

"We can't wait and play games and nothing gets done," Trump said as he opened the session with 17 House and Senate lawmakers. "We want to stop the problems."

Trump particularly cited the need for stronger background checks, which have been resisted by Republicans in Congress and the National Rifle Association. But the president said he told NRA officials over lunch recently that changes in gun culture are needed.

"Hey, I'm the biggest fan of the Second Amendment," Trump said.

"It's time," he said he told the NRA officials. "We have to stop this nonsense."

The White House meeting came amid fresh public debate over gun laws, fueled by student survivors of the massacre at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, who have been meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill. The school reopened Wednesday for the first time since a 19-year-old's Valentine's Day assault killed 17.

Momentum on gun legislation has stalled in Congress as Republican leaders showed little interest in pursuing stricter gun control laws and Democrats pushed new restrictions following the Florida shooting.

Some GOP lawmakers in Washington appear willing to consider legislative restrictions to curb gun violence, particularly in outlawing bump stocks, which the Trump administration also wants to do through administrative action. (Feb. 26)

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., told the president that if he backed legislation in Congress to expand background

checks, as proposed under a bill twice rejected in the Senate, it would pass.

"It is going to have to be you," Murphy said.

Ahead of the session, Senate Democrats urged the president to follow through on his call for "comprehensive background checks" by endorsing legislation to extend the pre-purchase reviews to online and gun show sales.

"You said that you would be 'strongly pushing comprehensive background checks' in an effort to combat the epidemic of mass shootings that has plagued our country," wrote the four senators led by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., citing Trump's weekend tweet after the Florida shooting. "We couldn't agree more."

Legislation has been revived in the Senate to close the gun show and online sales loophole. Democrats appealed to Trump to use his influence on Capitol Hill.

"With your leadership, Mr. President, we have an opportunity to break through the gridlock that has held this issue hostage for so many years and finally enact the kind of commonsense gun safety legislation that over 90 percent of Americans, both Democrats and Republicans, support," the senators wrote.

Among those at the White House were Sens. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., and Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who are pushing their bill — which failed twice in the Senate after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting — to broaden background checks.

"I think the mindset changed right now," Manchin said Wednesday on "CBS This Morning."

"We're seeing a movement we've never seen before," he said. "The kids have spoken up. ... Corporate America has woken up."

One major retailer, Dick's Sporting Goods, announced it was halting sales of assault-style rifles and high-capacity magazines at all of its stores and banning the sale of all guns to anyone under 21. Trump had floated the idea of an age restriction immediately after the Florida shooting but has not talked about it in recent days. Trump lunched recently with leaders of the NRA, which opposes the proposal.

Republican leaders, who have majority control of the House and Senate, are reluctant to lead on legislation without knowing they have Trump's full support and can rely on his popularity with a core flank of the GOP electorate to shield them from political blowback.

But Trump, who met with 17 senators and representatives from both parties, has proven an inconsistent partner in such policy debates, offering sweeping proposals — including his tweet for stronger background checks — only to drift from them.

"The political reality we're living in today is if President Trump doesn't get behind something they won't have the cover," Manchin said.

At the White House, the discussion was billed as a session focused on "school and community safety," and one of those attending, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, has proposed new federal grant funding to stem school violence. Hatch's bill would offer money for law enforcement and school staff training, campus infrastructure upgrades and mental health resources.

House and Senate Republicans have been talking about boosting school safety resources, and House Speaker Paul Ryan has mentioned that effort.

But Ryan has shown little interest in stricter gun control proposals being floated in Congress, largely leaving the issue in the hands of Trump and wary Senate leaders.

GOP leaders did not promise votes on the various gun-related bills, and they stopped short of offering solutions beyond pending legislation aimed at increasing participation in the existing federal background check system.

Even as he endorsed the measure, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell downplayed its significance, saying it would not be a "panacea" for the rash of gun violence.

But McConnell said he wanted to "at least show some progress toward dealing with one element of the problem."

The legislation from Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Chris Murphy, D-Conn., would strengthen the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, though votes were not yet scheduled amid resistance from within the GOP ranks and demands by Democrats to vote on other measures.

The "Fix NICS" bill, similar to one approved last year in the House, would reward federal agencies and states that utilize the background check system, and penalize those that don't properly report required records used to determine whether someone can legally buy a gun. It was introduced last fall after the shooting of churchgoers in Texas. At the time, authorities acknowledged having failed to report the Texas gunman's domestic violence conviction to the database.

"Let's do what we can and build from there," Cornyn said.

One of Trump's proposals, to prohibit sales of bump stocks — the devices that turn rifles into automatic-style weapons and were used in the Las Vegas mass shooting last fall — is being considered by the Justice Department.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions said top officials believe the hardware can be banned through the regulatory process, a departure from the Obama administration's approach. The approach is preferred by the NRA and could relieve Congress of pressure for legislative action.

Associated Press writers Ken Thomas, Catherine Lucey and Zeke Miller contributed to this story.

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Trump Undercuts GOP Talking Points: 'Take The Guns First'

By Cristiano Lima

Politico, February 28, 2018

President Donald Trump took a hammer to Republicans' usual talking points Wednesday, suggesting authorities skirt "due process" to seize guns from people who pose a public safety risk and accusing Republican lawmakers of being too "afraid" to stand up to the National Rifle Association.

During a meeting with a bipartisan group of lawmakers on school safety, Trump said there's "no bigger fan" of the NRA than himself.

But he told Sen. Pat Toomey the lawmaker was "afraid of the NRA" because a bill the Pennsylvania Republican introduced in 2013 didn't address raising the minimum age to buy certain weapons.

And Trump said he would prefer to move quickly to seize guns from people who could pose a danger.

"A lot of times, by the time you go to court, it takes so long to go to court to get the due process procedures," Trump said. "Take the guns first, go through due process second."

In the wide-ranging televised discussion, Trump also suggested an NRA-backed proposal to extend people's rights to carry concealed weapons was dead in the water politically and called for a more "comprehensive" measure on background checks for firearm sales than GOP lawmakers have offered so far.

The president lamented that people could obtain high-powered weapons, like the AR-15 assault gun used in the deadly Florida high school shooting, at the age of 18 in some places.

Trump told lawmakers he "would give very serious thought" to supporting a proposal to lift the age requirement on the purchase of such firearms to 21, even if it went against the wishes of the NRA.

"I can say that the NRA is opposed to it, and I'm a fan of the NRA, there's no bigger fan," Trump said of the proposal. "But that doesn't mean we have to agree on everything."

Toomey, who along with Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) introduced the bill in 2013, said the legislators "didn't address" that idea originally in their legislation, which has resurfaced in conversations in recent weeks. Their proposal would expand firearm background checks to include online sales and gun shows.

"You know why? Because you're afraid of the NRA," Trump responded.

Trump bemoaned that some officials were "petrified" of the gun group, while claiming it had less influence on him.

"They have great power over you people," Trump told lawmakers. "They have less power over me."

Trump praised legislation proposed by Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn to bolster the reporting process to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. But the president appeared to go beyond Republican leadership in calling for a more "comprehensive" approach to background checks for firearm purchases.

"Fix NICS' has some really good things in it, but it would be nice if we could add everything onto it," Trump told Cornyn. "And maybe you change the title, the U.S. Background Check Bill or whatever."

Cornyn replied: "If we could get 60 votes for it, Mr. President, I'm all for it."

Wait—Did Trump Just Give Pro-Gun Control Democrats Everything They Wanted?

By Matt Vespa

Townhall, February 28, 2018

Prior to their meeting with President Trump, members of Congress did not know where he stood on gun issues and the Second Amendment. Well, they might have had an idea, though they wanted more "clarity." President Trump has said he wants to do a few things in the aftermath of the horrific school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which has shocked the nation, but also energized the small, but vocal army of the anti-gun Left.

The meeting went as their previous one on immigration. Trump went around the room, asked for opinions, and engaged in a dialogue with Democratic and Republican members of Congress. Some of it was grounded, where the president discussed his desire to keep firearms out of the hands of the mentally ill and the unstable. No one disagrees with that, but where it went off the hinges is where he advocated for a comprehensive bill that included universal background checks without concealed carry reciprocity and the confiscation of firearms from those who might be considered a danger without due process.

"Take the guns first, go through due process second," Trump said, responding to Vice President Mike Pence's proposal, where he mentioned due process with regards to taking weapons away from those who might be unstable to avoid civil rights from being trampled. Trump said that could take too long.

Trump mentioned multiple times that he's a big Second Amendment supporter and a big fan of the National Rifle Association, with whom he had lunch with the executive

leadership on Sunday. The president said he told them, "It's time. We're going to stop this nonsense."

As mentioned before, Trump supports raising the age limit for the purchasing of long guns to 21, something that Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA) balked at for the simple reason that a) it denies Americans of voting-age their Second Amendment rights; b) he represents a hunting state; and c) there are already a lot of 18, 19, and 20 year olds in his state and elsewhere who have rifles for target practice and hunting. Toomey, along with Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) tried to do a comprehensive background check bill after Newtown, which failed. But it's been rehashed, with the president wanting to add mental health provisions, raising the age limit for firearms, and having universal background checks, while nixing any hope of having concealed carry reciprocity attached to the legislation to make it at least palatable to Republicans.

The only "entertaining" part of the meeting was when Toomey mentioned that Obama supported his failed legislation, which Trump responded by saying, "well, that was your problem." Manchin was smirking.

Yet, in all, this meeting was a total disaster. It pretty much was a capitulation to pro-gun control Democrats. While gun bans aren't on the table, though the latest bill from Democrats come pretty damn close to that—gun confiscation with no due process is troubling. The raising of the age limit for firearms is another way to chip away and deny Americans their Second Amendment rights. Also, is there any way to conduct universal background checks without a national database? That's what Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) wrote in an op-ed for CNN after Sandy Hook, citing the American Civil Liberties Union.

If I were the NRA, I would feel like I've been thrown under the bus. Here's how they explained why they endorsed Trump in 2016:

When asked if the NRA was concerned about comments in favor of new gun control Trump had made in the years before his presidential run, Cox pointed to Trump's current positions and said the candidate no longer supports an assault weapons ban.

"His first position paper that he put out on the campaign was on immigration," he said. "The second position paper was on the Second Amendment. I encourage people to go to his website and read his Second Amendment paper that outlines his opposition to gun bans, his opposition to magazine bans."

"He was asked about a past comment he had made 20 some odd years ago about supporting a semi-auto ban and he said he no longer supports that position. So, you look at the campaign he's running and the positions he's articulating versus the one hundred percent certainty that we know with Hillary Clinton and that decision becomes crystal clear."

Did the Parkland shooting happen because we have lax gun laws and a broken system or is it due to government incompetence? It's starting to look like the latter. The FBI was informed and did nothing. Local law enforcement was called to the shooter's home over 40 times, with some calls detailing how the shooter could be a threat to the public—nothing happened. Concerning state officials, if the shooter's self-mutilation was taken seriously, he could have been committed via Baker Act. That would have shown up on a background check, which could have prevented him from buying an AR-15 in February of 2017, days after he was expelled from the school. It seems the system is not in a crisis mode, we just have incompetent people administering it. As for bump stocks, Trump vowed to ban them through executive order. President Trump has done a lot of good for the country, but I have to disagree with him vociferously on this one.

Last point: this is why you should be able to buy rifles and shotguns at 18. If raising the age to purchase long guns were enacted, this single mother, who was 18 at the time of this attack, would have been left defenseless in the face of a home invasion.

Trump Surprises Lawmakers In Backing Some Tougher Gun Controls

By Anne Gearan, Mike DeBonis And Seung Min Kim
Washington Post, February 28, 2018

President Trump upended modest Republican gun-control proposals and defied the National Rifle Association during a freewheeling session with lawmakers Wednesday that the president said should yield comprehensive restrictions "on the strong side."

But in the televised meeting at the White House, Trump sent so many mixed signals about what he envisioned for a package on firearms and school safety that he left Democrats gleeful and Republicans tight-lipped amid doubts that Congress would produce any legislation.

"We want to pass something great, and to me the something great has to be where we prevent it from happening again," Trump said, referring to the shooting deaths of 17 students and faculty members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 14.

Sitting with a group of Democrats and Republicans, including some who are backed by the NRA, Trump made what sounded like an extraordinary break with the powerful gun-rights organization. He accused lawmakers of being so "petrified" by the NRA that they have not been willing to take even small steps on gun control.

"They have great power over you people," Trump said. "They have less power over me."

The session was reminiscent of a bipartisan White House meeting Trump convened in January on immigration,

in which the unpredictable president promised to sign any compromise solution Congress could craft, only to reject the outcome days later. Behind the scenes, administration officials had sabotaged a bipartisan bill that inevitably collapsed.

On Wednesday, Trump backed or said he would consider tougher background checks for gun buyers, greater police power to seize guns from mentally disturbed people, the outlawing of "bump stock" devices and tighter age limits for buying rifles such as that used in Parkland.

Most striking were Trump's remarks decrying what he called excessive "checks and balances" that limit what can be done to prevent mentally unfit people from buying or keeping guns.

"Take the firearms first, and then go to court," Trump said, cutting off Vice President Pence as Pence articulated a version of the due-process arguments that the NRA and other gun-rights advocates have used to derail past gun-control measures. "You could do exactly what you're saying, but take the guns first, go through due process second."

That prompted a stunning rebuke from Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.), who accused Trump of flouting the Constitution.

"Strong leaders don't automatically agree with the last thing that was said to them," Sasse said in a statement. "We have the Second Amendment and due process of law for a reason. We're not ditching any Constitutional protections simply because the last person the president talked to today doesn't like them."

Trump pressed lawmakers to send him "one terrific bill" combining several proposals aimed at reducing gun violence, although that could complicate the legislative outlook for such a contentious issue in an election year.

"It would be so beautiful to have one bill," Trump said at the outset.

In closing, he urged them, "I'd rather have you come down on the strong side."

In between, he dismissed an NRA-backed proposal to expand gun owners' ability to carry concealed weapons, saying it would spoil the package he wants lawmakers to assemble.

"If you add concealed carry to this, you'll never get it passed," Trump told House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.), the chamber's chief vote-counter and a survivor of a mass shooting last year. "We want to get something done," Trump told Scalise.

Scalise was trying to win Trump's backing for a compromise to combine a modest bill meant to bolster reporting to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, or NICS, with a measure requiring all states to recognize concealed-carry permits issued by other states.

In an interview after the meeting, Scalise said that he was "not giving up on this issue" and that the president's remarks had not fundamentally changed the dynamics in the

conservative House. The onus, he said, was on the Senate to craft a bill that addressed the gaps in the current law but protected gun owners' rights.

Scalise suggested that Trump's emphasis on bucking the NRA was misplaced.

"It isn't as much about the NRA as the millions of people who strongly, passionately believe that they should have the right under the Constitution to defend themselves and their families, and I strongly support that right," he said. "Our Founding Fathers strongly believed in the right of law-abiding citizens to defend themselves when they founded this country. We ought to preserve that."

Trump's embrace of several tougher restrictions on firearms — steps strongly opposed by many Republicans and the NRA — drew a giddy response from Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), a proponent of an assault weapons ban.

Hours before the summit, Democrats called on Trump to back expanded background checks, throwing their weight behind a measure that failed to clear Congress after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

Now, after the Florida high school shooting, Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.) and other top Democrats think that Trump could help muscle through a measure long opposed by the NRA and many GOP lawmakers.

Although Trump appeared to support what would be the largest effort to enact new gun control in more than a decade, it was not clear what role he would play and whether he would try to insulate lawmakers from a gun-rights backlash.

"I thought it was fascinating television," Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn (R-Tex.) said afterward, suggesting the president was playing to the cameras.

Cornyn sat next to Trump during the one-hour meeting, which took place with reporters and news cameras crowded behind the lawmakers' chairs. He, like other lawmakers present, could be seen exchanging glances with colleagues as Trump spoke.

Trump appeared to agree with Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), who told him: "Mr. President, the reason nothing has gotten done here is that the gun lobby has had a veto power over any legislation that comes before the Congress."

Trump also called himself "the biggest fan of the Second Amendment" and a fan of the NRA, but he said he had told NRA leaders at a lunch Sunday that he is willing to buck them.

"It's time," Trump aid. "We've got to stop this nonsense."

The NRA's PAC or super PAC spent \$42.3 million in ads and other forms of electioneering supporting Trump in 2016.

Trump repeated his pledge to unilaterally do away with bump stocks — devices that allow semiautomatic weapons to

fire like automatic weapons — which he said would give lawmakers one less issue to worry about.

Although Trump had been silent in recent days about whether he supports raising the buying age for long guns to 21 from 18, he said Wednesday he thinks the idea, opposed by the NRA, has merit and will consider it.

When told that the age-21 limit was not included in a universal-background-checks bill written by Sens. Patrick J. Toomey (R-Pa.) and Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.), Trump told Toomey: "You know why? Because you're afraid of the NRA."

Trump tweeted support this month for "comprehensive" background checks, and Republican leaders have interpreted that as support for a narrow measure aimed at improving the reporting of disqualifying offenses to NICS.

But Democrats favor a much broader expansion of background checks and are pushing legislation that "at minimum" would mandate them for all private gun sales — including at gun shows or over the Internet. Currently, only federally licensed firearms dealers must conduct such checks.

In 2013, just months after the Sandy Hook massacre, a version of the legislation was proposed by Toomey and Manchin. It failed to advance, on a 54-to-46 vote, falling short of the necessary 60. Five Democrats and 41 Republicans opposed it.

The NRA opposed the legislation at the time, arguing that it "will not prevent the next shooting, will not solve violent crime and will not keep our kids safe in schools."

Manchin and Toomey have expressed a willingness to revisit their legislation, and a number of senators who voted no in 2013 have said since the shooting in Florida that they might reconsider their positions.

For now, many lawmakers want to pass the narrower legislation related to NICS, although that bill is tied up in objections in the Senate. GOP leaders are not eager to let the bill eat up Senate floor time unless it can pass and are saying it is unlikely that the measure will come to a vote anytime soon without a clearer path to passage.

"We're working with those who've voiced concerns and talked about the art of the possible," Cornyn said Wednesday. "The problem on this issue is there's so many conflicting demands that nothing happens. Reminds me of immigration, in that sense. That would be unacceptable in my view."

Trump Wants Joe Manchin's Gun Control, Rejects Steve Scalise's National Reciprocity Push

By Awr Hawkins

Breitbart, February 28, 2018

President Donald Trump embraced Sen. Joe Manchin's (D-WV) gun control bill but rejected Rep. Steve Scalise's (R-

LA) push for national reciprocity during a bipartisan meeting with lawmakers Wednesday afternoon.

After listening to Sen Chris Murphy (D-CT), Trump looked at toward the end of the table and asked Sens. Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Joe Manchin (D-WV) to detail their gun control bill.

The Manchin/Toomey gun control bill is the same universal background check legislation supported by Barack Obama in the wake of the heinous attack on Sandy Hook Elementary School. It the very bill that was defeated in the Democrat-controlled Senate on April 17, 2013.

Toomey described it for Trump, saying the bill "strengthens the reporting of information into the background check system" and "requires background checks on all commercial sales." This is code-talk for requiring background checks on private gun sales, which Toomey described as sales at gun shows and online (even though online sales already require a background check).

Manchin then spoke and suggested that West Virginians will support the Manchin/Toomey gun control bill if Trump will support it. He did not mention that the Manchin/Toomey bill would not have prevented the Florida attack — just as it would not have prevented the Sandy Hook attack that spawned it.

Trump spoke of the using the Manchin/Toomey bill "as a base" to which other gun bills can be added, and then continued taking comments from various senators and representatives in attendance.

When it was Rep. Scalise's time to speak, he highlighted the crime-fighting value of concealed carriers and the need to pass national reciprocity legislation. National reciprocity was introduced in the House on January 3, 2017, and passed in the House on December 6, 2017. It was introduced in the Senate on March 1, 2017, and it has yet to come up for a vote nor has Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said a word in support of it.

Trump shut down Scalise's reciprocity push, suggesting the gun control package being pieced together would never pass if national reciprocity were added to it.

Trump looked at Scalise and said, "You know I'm your biggest fan in the whole world. I think that maybe that bill will someday pass but it should pass as a separate bill... You'll never get this passed. If you add concealed carry to this you'll never get it passed. Let it be a separate bill."

Trump added, "We want to get something done."

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Trump Urges Lawmakers To 'Do Something' Soon About School Shootings

By Dave Boyer

Washington Times, February 28, 2018

President Trump convened a meeting of lawmakers on school safety Wednesday, declaring that Washington "can't wait and play games" in the wake of the Florida high school massacre.

In a surprise, Mr. Trump expressed support for reviving a Senate bill that former President Obama sought in 2013 to expand background checks to all gun sales.

"We have to do something about it," Mr. Trump said at the White House of school shootings. "We can't wait and play games and nothing gets done. It can be ended and it will be ended."

The president outlined his proposals, which are expected to be submitted to Congress Thursday. Among them is allowing more qualified school personnel to carry guns.

"First we must harden our schools against attack," the president said. "You've got to have defense too. You can't just be sitting ducks."

Mr. Trump also said there must be a mental-health aspect to the proposals, to prevent the mentally ill from obtaining guns.

Sens. Pat Toomey, Pennsylvania Republican, and Joe Manchin III, West Virginia Democrat, urged Mr. Trump to support their legislation originally proposed in 2013 to expand background checks to all gun sales, including gun shows and internet sales.

"With your support, it would pass," Mr. Manchin told the president.

The Manchin-Toomey bill failed to pass the Senate five years ago, receiving 54 votes instead of the needed 60. But Mr. Trump expressed interest in using Manchin-Toomey as a base for an overall bill, and asked if the lawmakers would consider adding a provision to raise the legal age limit from 18 to 21 for purchasing certain long guns.

"If we're going to use you as a base, the two of you, we're going to have to iron out that question," Mr. Trump told the senators.

Mr. Toomey replied, "We don't address it" in their bill.

"You know why, because you're afraid of the NRA," Mr. Trump retorted.

The president referred to the Manchin-Toomey bill as "the best we've ever done."

When Rep. Steve Scalise, Louisiana Republican, pushed for expanding conceal-carry permits, the president interrupted him.

"I'm with you, but let it be a separate bill," Mr. Trump said. "You'll never get it passed. We want to get something done."

'Because You're Afraid Of The NRA': Trump Says Pat Toomey's Gun Bill Doesn't Go Far Enough

By Tracie Mauriello, Post-gazette Washington Bureau
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON – A bill to expand background checks for gun purchasers doesn't appear to go far enough for President Donald Trump, who met with its sponsors and other lawmakers at the White House Wednesday.

The bill would require background checks for purchases online and at gun shows but does not raise the age restriction for buying long guns, which the president wants.

During the meeting, U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., confirmed that the legislation he wrote with U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., doesn't address that.

"You know why? Because you're afraid of the NRA," the president responded.

The National Rifle Association opposes both the background check expansion and the idea of raising the age for long gun purchases from 18 to 21, the same age required to buy handguns.

"I can say the NRA is opposed to it," Mr. Trump said. "These are great patriots. They love our country, but that doesn't mean we have to agree on it."

U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., who also attended the meeting, said Congress has not been able to pass the Manchin-Toomey bill because the gun lobby has veto power.

Mr. Toomey could not immediately be reached after his White House meeting, but he explained his position on age limits in a phone call with Pennsylvania reporters earlier Wednesday.

"The majority of 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds who purchase long guns do so for hunting or target shooting. That's why they have a rifle or a shotgun," he said. "The way I look at it, is it good policy to deny law-abiding, 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds the option to buy a long gun? I remain skeptical. I'm not convinced the benefits outweigh the costs."

He noted that handguns, which those under 21 cannot legally buy, are used to commit crimes much more frequently than long guns.

Mr. Toomey told reporters he had three things on his agenda for his White House meeting: expanded background checks, no-fly no-buy legislation, and increased prosecution of people who lie about their criminal histories in order to buy guns.

As Mr. Toomey prepared for that meeting, U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., was organizing his own call for gun reform. He is planning to lead a group of six Democratic

senators on the Senate floor this evening to urge Republican leaders to allow votes on gun bills.

Mr. Toomey has been working to pass bipartisan gun reforms since the 2012 school massacre in Newtown, Conn. His background checks legislation twice failed to pass the Senate, but he thinks it has a chance now.

That's because survivors of the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida are doing something Sandy Hook Elementary School students couldn't: organize and advocate for themselves.

The "accumulation of these massacres" and the "outrage from high school kids across the country" and especially from Parkland, is having an effect on Republican colleagues who previously voted against expanded background checks.

Some of them have told Mr. Toomey that they are "open to reconsidering" the bill he and U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., first introduced in 2013, but none have indicated they've changed their mind. Mr. Toomey said he is open to tweaking his bill to get their support but isn't clear what changes would get them onboard.

Support from Mr. Trump would help, the senator speculated.

"The president has indicated he does want to do something here. I hope it would be meaningful," Mr. Toomey told Pennsylvania reporters on a conference call Wednesday.

One of those things is providing incentives for teachers who carry guns. That isn't a priority for Mr. Toomey, but he said it's something he could support if teachers are well-trained and if the decision were made at the local level.

"I wouldn't impose it nationally but I think if a school district chooses to go down that road" they should be allowed to, he said.

A better solution, though, would be "hardening" schools, he said. That means designating a single point of entry and having security guards and metal detectors.

His focus during his White House visit, though, was on gun sales. He wants to ensure background checks for gun purchases no matter where they are made, to restrict people on the no-fly list from buying guns, and to require the FBI to share information with state law enforcement agencies when people misrepresent their criminal history on background check forms.

Lying on those forms is already a felony but it is seldom enforced, Mr. Toomey said. The legislation he supports would enable — but not require — state law enforcement to prosecute.

"No one of these bills, nor all of them together, would be a panacea for mass shootings or gun violence in general," noting that mental illness plays a role. "We've got a serious problem that's going to require, sadly, some time and many different approaches."

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Trump Says 'Take The Guns First' From Mentally Ill With 'Due Process' Later, Tells Lawmakers Not To Fear NRA

By Todd J. Gillman,

Dallas Morning News, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump gave full-throated support Wednesday to Sen. John Cornyn's bill to beef up federal gun buyer background checks. But at a freewheeling White House meeting on mass shootings and school safety, he gave the Texan tips for marketing the idea better.

Rather than calling it the "Fix NICS" bill, a mouthful that refers to the national criminal records database, Trump urged Cornyn to dub it "The US Background Check Bill."

He also called for confiscating guns from people who are mentally ill.

"I don't want mentally ill people to be having guns," he said. "Take the guns first, go through due process second."

It was a startling stance, and Trump reiterated it. "Take the firearms first and then go to court," he said, arguing that waiting for legal procedures can take too long to prevent a shooting such as the one that left 17 people dead at a Parkland, Fla., high school earlier this month.

"Take the guns first. Go through due process second," President Trump says at a meeting with bipartisan lawmakers. "I like taking the guns early." <https://t.co/IQkq3krCWs> pic.twitter.com/0iPywBQ66b— CNN (@CNN) February 28, 2018

The hour-long meeting, streamed live from the Cabinet Room, included lawmakers from both parties and strong advocates for gun control and for gun rights. Trump voiced support for a number of priorities, making clear that he wants a multifaceted bill that keeps guns from people with mental illness and those with a history of domestic violence, raises the age for buying an assault style rifle to 21, and beefs up school security.

Trump has used such public sessions before to brainstorm, cajole and showcase his views on delicate issues. And he didn't shy from laying down some markers — for instance, refusing to give ground on arming teachers, and also chiding House Majority Whip Steve Scalise for trying to use momentum for a gun bill to deliver an NRA priority, allowing people with a concealed carry permit in one state to use it other states.

"I'm with you, but let it be a separate bill. If you add concealed carry to this bill, you'll never get it passed. We want to get something done," Trump said.

Cornyn, seated to the president's right, pitched the bill to improve reporting to the federal database used for

background checks. The shooter responsible for the massacre at a Sutherland Springs, Texas, church, had a court martial record that should have precluded him from buying the weapons used, but it wasn't reported properly.

"It's a good place for us to start," Cornyn said, readily conceding that "it's not the be-all, end-all."

Trump supports effort by John Cornyn to fix the gun background check system

Not all good ideas will pass, he added, but "we've acquiesced to failure and not done things that we know are within our power, like the Fix NICS bill.... None of us want to look these families in the face in the wake of another mass shooting and say we didn't do everything in our power."

The powerful NRA supports the Cornyn idea but as Trump noted, the group opposes many other steps toward gun control, including some that he supports, and he emphasized that he's willing to defy the group.

@JohnCornyn on the gun summit: "I thought it was fascinating television." Us too Seung Min Kim (@seungminkim) February 28, 2018

At one point he pointedly asked Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., if a bill he's sponsoring with Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., would raise the age to buy assault-style weapons. No, came the answer.

"You know why, because you're afraid of the NRA," Trump said. "Some of you people are petrified of the NRA. You can't be petrified."

Sen Klobuchar's assessment of the WH gun legislation meeting: "Positive with acknowledgment that he's backed down before..." — Frank Thorp V (@frankthorp) February 28, 2018

On the other side of the issue, Trump ruled out getting rid of gun-free school zones, arguing that would-be shooters can't feel confident that "they're not going to have bullets coming at them from the other direction."

Trump directs Justice Department to ban rapid-fire bump stocks

Trump has called for encouraging teachers, coaches and other school personnel trained in firearms to carry guns at schools to deter attackers and protect students.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., noted that she became mayor of San Francisco after an assassination. She expressed disappointed that an assault weapons ban she pushed after the Newtown, Conn., school massacre in 2012 failed.

"We thought Sandy Hook would be the end," she said. "The killings have gone on. The number of incidents have gone up."

Trump vowed to ban bump stocks, the device used last October in a Las Vegas rampage that left nearly 60 concert-goers dead, by allowing continuous fire with a semi-automatic weapon.

"You won't have to worry about bump stocks. Shortly that'll be gone," Trump said.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., noted that 97 percent of Americans support universal background checks, closing a loophole that allows sales online and at gun shows to take place without a background check.

"People want to get it done," Trump responded, though it wasn't entirely clear he meant to endorse that expansion of background checks.

He did make clear his view that the mentally ill -- "like this guy" in Parkland, Nikolas Cruz -- shouldn't be allowed to buy guns. But while Cruz did have a history of mental illness and threats, experts call it misguided to generalize such a link, because just 1 percent of such incidents involve someone with serious mental illness.

He also expressed dismay that people under 21 can't buy a handgun, but can buy an assault-style rifle of the sort used in the Florida massacre at age 18. Feinstein interjected to ask if he would sign a bill raising the age to 21.

"I'll tell you what, I'll give it a lot consideration...and I'm the one bringing it up," Trump said. "The NRA is opposed to it.... I'm a big fan of the NRA. They're big patriots... That doesn't mean we have to agree on everything."

He noted the political costs.

"A lot of people are afraid of that issue, raising the age for that weapon to 21," he said.

Trump also warned against going too far in "hardening" schools against armed intruders, raising the specter that if a shooter ever does get inside a heavily fortified school and locks the door behind him, he'd have students trapped with police unable to come to their aid.

Trump Says Take Guns First And Worry About 'Due Process Second' In White House Gun Meeting

By David Jackson,deirdre Shesgreen And Nicole Gaudiano

USA Today, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump said Wednesday he favors taking guns away from people who might commit violence before going through legal due process in the courts, one of many startling comments he made in a rambling White House meeting designed to hash out school safety legislation with a bipartisan group of lawmakers.

"I like taking guns away early," Trump said. "Take the guns first, go through due process second."

Trump also said some of his fellow Republicans were "petrified" of the NRA, called on lawmakers to produce a "comprehensive" gun bill, and squelched prospects for a GOP-backed concealed carry proposal as part of a broader gun package.

"We must harden our schools against attack," Trump said while also calling for other steps to end the "senseless violence" that has claimed lives in classrooms, nightclubs and workplaces across the country.

"We can't wait and play games and nothing gets done," Trump said two weeks after a mass shooting that claimed 17 lives at a high school in Parkland, Fla.

Trump said he wants "one terrific bill" that can address better background checks, arming qualified teachers and school officials, increasing the age limit for certain gun purchases, and finding new ways to keep guns away from mentally ill people and others who should not have them.

All of these ideas have drawn objections from either gun-control or gun-rights interest groups, and from key lawmakers in Congress, including some of Trump's guests at the White House.

While some Republicans objected to new age limits and some Democrats questioned the wisdom of arming teachers, all pledged to work with Trump to try and get something done.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., an outspoken proponent of gun control since the 2012 mass shooting at an elementary school in his state, told Trump that "the gun lobby has had a veto power" over gun legislation, and that the president himself will have to work to overcome their opposition this time around.

"I like that responsibility," Trump told Murphy. "I really do."

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who backs a bill to improve the national instant background check system, said Congress should not go home "empty-handed" in the wake of the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland.

"The public demands that we act," Cornyn said.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., however, said Tuesday that the Republican majority would focus on law enforcement failures, not tighter gun control. He faulted "a colossal breakdown in the system" for the Parkland shooting, including repeated warnings about the assailant that were not followed up on by the FBI and local authorities.

Law enforcement and education organizations have opposed arming teachers, saying it would be counterproductive and actually increase the chances of violence.

Rep. Ted Deutch, D-Fla., echoed those concerns at the White House meeting, telling Trump there are "great differences of opinion" about whether "having teachers armed with guns firing at a mass shooter is the answer. I don't think it is. Many others don't."

At another point, Trump said he doesn't want "mentally ill people to be having guns," but some lawmakers said that policy could be drawn too broadly.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, told Trump that many people may with mental illnesses "are not a danger," and should not be discriminated against.

Trump's call to raise the legal age for purchase of some guns from 18 to 21 has drawn opposition from the NRA, which spent about \$30 million on his behalf during the 2016 election. The NRA and other groups say raising the age would deprive young people of their constitutional right to own firearms.

NRA spokeswoman Jennifer Baker said the organization supports improvements to the mental health system, improvements to the existing instant background check system, and efforts to keep "dangerously mentally ill" people from having firearms, but with due process for those who are wrongly accused.

At the White House meeting, Trump said he has spoken with NRA leaders and told them that "we've got to do something." He accused some lawmakers of being "petrified" of the NRA, and that they can and should act despite its opposition.

Murphy disputed Trump's optimism, telling the president, "I think you underestimate the power of the gun lobby."

Other Democrats have raised similar questions about the GOP-led Congress, citing Republican reliance on campaign contributions from the NRA and other gun-rights groups.

"The gun lobby is so powerful here and members of Congress, invertebrates that so many of them are, are not willing to stand up to it," said Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, on a conference call with reporters.

In a pre-meeting public letter, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer of New York and other Democrats urged Trump to explicitly endorse a bill closing loopholes that allow unchecked purchases on the Internet and at gun shows.

"We stand ready and eager to work with you to find common ground and close these dangerous loopholes," said the letter also signed by Murphy and U.S. Sens. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn.

'Take The Guns First, Go Through Due Process Second'

By Kyle Feldscher

Washington Examiner, February 28, 2018

President Trump said he would back a proposal allowing law enforcement to take guns from people who could be a danger to other people and then let the courts decide if their rights were violated.

While meeting with lawmakers in a gun control discussion Wednesday, Trump disagreed with Vice President Mike Pence's statement that no one's rights should be trampled in gun control legislation.

"Take the firearms first and then go to court," Trump said. "Because that's another system — a lot of times by the time you go to court, it takes so long to go to court, to get the due process procedures."

He added, "I like taking the guns early. Like, in this crazy man's case that just took place in Florida. He had a lot of firearms, they saw everything. To go to court would have taken a long time. You could do exactly what you're saying but take the guns first, go through due process second."

The meeting was another extensive legislative discussion with senators and representatives about what gun control legislation is possible in Congress.

Trump expressed openness to a bill with comprehensive background checks and fixes to the FBI's instant background check system. He also seemed to support the idea of raising the legal buying age for a rifle purchase from 18 to 21.

Trump: 'Take The Guns First, Go Through Due Process Second'

By Brett Samuels

[The Hill](#), February 28, 2018

President Trump on Wednesday voiced support for confiscating guns from certain individuals deemed to be dangerous, even if it violates due process rights.

"I like taking the guns early, like in this crazy man's case that just took place in Florida ... to go to court would have taken a long time," Trump said at a meeting with lawmakers on school safety and gun violence.

"Take the guns first, go through due process second," Trump said.

Trump was responding to comments from Vice President Pence that families and local law enforcement should have more tools to report potentially dangerous individuals with weapons.

"Allow due process so no one's rights are trampled, but the ability to go to court, obtain an order and then collect not only the firearms but any weapons," Pence said.

"Or, Mike, take the firearms first, and then go to court," Trump responded.

Trump met with lawmakers on Wednesday to discuss gun laws and school safety in the aftermath of a Feb. 14 shooting at a high school in Parkland, Fla., that left 17 people dead.

The suspected shooter, Nikolas Cruz, was able to legally purchase the AR-15 reportedly used in the shooting despite numerous calls to law enforcement about his unstable behavior.

Trump Urges Congress To Take Action On Guns

At meeting with lawmakers, president says Florida school killings had shifted the debate

By Louise Radnofsky And Kristina Peterson

[Wall Street Journal](#), February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Trump Vows To Ban Bump Stocks; Says Mentally Ill Shouldn't Have Guns

By Crystal Hill

[McClatchy](#), February 28, 2018

President Donald Trump said Wednesday he will write an executive order banning bump stocks.

The Republican president is discussing school safety with a bipartisan group of lawmakers at the White House.

Bump fire stocks are devices that allow semi-automatic weapons to fire at a more rapid rate, CNN reported. Investigators have said 12 bump stocks were found in the hotel room where a shooter opened fire on concertgoers last year in Las Vegas, killing 58 people.

Trump said that it's time a president "stepped up" on gun safety. He called for guns to be taken away from people who are mentally ill.

Republican leaders have showed little interest in pursuing stricter gun control laws and Democrats have pushed new restrictions following the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, the Associated Press reported.

Trump told Republicans to set aside plans for an expansion of concealed-carry laws: "You'll never get it passed," he said, according to AP.

Ahead of the session, Senate Democrats urged the president to follow through on his call for "comprehensive background checks" by endorsing legislation to extend the pre-purchase reviews to online and gun show sales, the AP said.

Cuomo Faults D.C. Democrats For Not Pushing Tough Gun Bill

By Jimmy Vielkind

[POLITICO New York](#), February 28, 2018

Directing his rhetoric beyond President Donald Trump or Republicans in charge of Congress, Cuomo called on congressional Democrats to take the lead on substantive legislation. | Getty

Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo faulted members of his own party Wednesday for not advancing tougher gun control legislation.

Cuomo, the two-term New York governor who is positioning himself for a potential 2020 presidential bid, told New York-based reporters on an unrelated morning conference call that New York's gun control laws are already

very strict, and that federal action is needed to prevent mass shootings like the recent tragedy in South Florida.

Directing his rhetoric beyond President Donald Trump or Republicans in charge of Congress, Cuomo called on congressional Democrats to take the lead on substantive legislation.

"I'd like to see the national Democrats put a real gun bill on the table: full background checks, no loopholes, mental health database and ban assault weapons," Cuomo said. "I understand why the White House won't do it, I don't understand why the national Democrats don't do it."

Democrats in the Senate are resisting GOP attempts to advance the so-called Fix NICS bill, which would encourage states and federal agencies to provide more data to the FBI's centralized background check system.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) carries a bill that would revive and update the federal assault weapons ban. It has not received support from Republican leaders, even as some in the GOP have said they would support raising the age for firearm purchases from 18 to 21 and banning bump stocks, which allow a semi-automatic rifle to be fired at a rate similar to an automatic gun.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said that his caucus had met with students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, the site of the mass shooting that left 17 students dead, and would release a detailed plan by the end of the week.

"The national Democrats are debating it, so for him to say that is incorrect. We are going to do it," Schumer said on a conference call. "We're pulling everything together, and we're going to have a very strong package."

In 2013, Cuomo pushed through the SAFE Act which broadened the definition of banned assault weapons, outlawed magazines that hold more than 10 rounds and required mental health professionals to report patients "likely to engage in conduct that would result in serious harm to self or others" into a database that restricts their ability to buy guns.

Cuomo called the GOP plans "baby steps at best."

"It's a political tactic to make it look like you're doing something when it will have no real effect," he said. "How that's a responsible answer to this, I have no idea. I think they're afraid of the NRA, and I think the NRA's opposition to the move, 18 to 21, is a political charade. I think it's just so they can say they acted against the NRA. What real difference does it make to the NRA if the age goes from 18 to 21? They lose sales temporarily, but they get them back."

Nick Niedzwiedek contributed to this report.

Poll Finds Florida Voters Want Assault-weapons Ban, Don't Want Teachers Armed

By Anthony Man

South Florida Sun Sentinel, February 28, 2018

The latest poll of Florida voters, released Wednesday, shows a broad consensus in favor of stricter gun laws, including a ban on assault weapons, and opposition to arming teachers.

Some ideas have chart-busting support. Requiring background checks for all gun buyers is supported by 96 percent of Florida voters. A mandatory waiting period on all gun purchases has support of 87 percent. And 89 percent want to allow police or family members to ask a judge to remove guns from someone who might be at risk of violent behavior.

To Peter A. Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Poll, the consensus two weeks after the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School is remarkable. "Florida voters — be they young or old, white or black, man or woman — have a common enemy," he said. "Floridians are strongly united that more needs to be done to rein in guns, especially the type of gun used this month to massacre 17 people in Parkland."

The results also reveal divisions based on gender, political affiliation, whether or not people live in households in which someone owns a gun and whether people live in cities, suburbs or rural communities.

For example, 62 percent of Florida voters surveyed by Quinnipiac said they favored a nationwide ban on the sale of assault weapons, with 33 percent opposing the ban. Support is strong among Democrats (86 percent), independent voters (62 percent), women (75 percent) city dwellers (65 percent) and suburban residents (64 percent).

Support is lower among Republicans (40 percent), men (47 percent) households in which someone owns a gun (43 percent). And rural voters are evenly split, with 48 percent supporting a ban and 47 percent opposed.

The Quinnipiac survey, and a poll from Florida Atlantic University, found some of what most Florida voters want are the opposite of what the Florida Legislature is working on. Committees in the Republican-controlled Legislature voted down a ban on assault weapons. It is advancing legislation that would encourage armed teachers.

Florida voters also don't want educators carrying guns in schools, Quinnipiac found. And since the shooting, President Donald Trump has repeatedly called for arming schoolteachers.

The survey found 56 percent of Florida voters oppose and 40 percent support the idea of arming teachers and school officials.

Democrats (86 percent), independent voters (60 percent), women (63 percent) city dwellers (58 percent), and suburbanites (57 percent) oppose the idea. Republicans (72 percent), people who live in households with guns (57 percent) and rural residents (50 percent) support it. Men were tied at 48 percent.

The Stoneman Douglas shooter used an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, and a majority of Florida voters — 53 percent — want a nationwide ban on the sale of semi-automatic rifles, with 42 percent opposed.

Support is highest among Democrats (78 percent), independents (55 percent), women (68 percent), city dwellers (57 percent), and suburbanites (56 percent). Opposition is highest among Republicans (66 percent), men (59 percent), people in gun-owning households (64 percent) and rural residents (60 percent).

Quinnipiac used live interviewers to call 1,156 Florida voters via landlines and cell phones from Friday through Monday. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points. Breakdowns for smaller groups, such as men, women, Democrats and Republicans, can have higher margins of error but the relatively large sample size of the overall poll makes results from subgroups more meaningful.

As with the ideas of arming educators and banning the sale of semi-automatic rifles, the biggest differences surface with some of the most emotionally fraught questions.

— Ease of buying a gun in Florida today. A large majority, 63 percent said it was too easy, 28 percent said it was about right, and just 1 percent said it was too difficult.

Too easy was the choice of Democrats (89 percent), independents (64 percent), women (75 percent) city residents (66 percent) and suburbanites (64 percent).

Members of other groups were more closely divided: Republicans (38 percent too easy, 50 percent about right), men (49 percent too easy, 43 percent about right), gun-owning households (48 percent too easy, 46 percent about right); rural residents (53 percent too easy, 41 percent about right).

— Effect of more people carrying guns on public safety. Almost six in 10 Florida voters — 56 percent — said the state would be less safe if more people were carrying guns and 34 percent said it would make the state safer. There were deep divisions on the question.

Those who felt it would make the state less safe included Democrats (91 percent), independent voters (58 percent), women (67 percent) city dwellers (59 percent) and suburbanites (56 percent).

More guns would make Florida safer, according to Republicans (64 percent) and people in households where guns are owned (54 percent).

Rural residents more closely divided between safer (43 percent) and less safe (48 percent). Men were also evenly split between safer (48 percent) and less safe (43 percent).

— Requiring gun purchasers to be at least 21 years old. The idea was supported by 78 percent of Florida voters and opposed by 20 percent.

There were variances among different groups, but not as pronounced as on many other issues. Democrats were the biggest proponents of a minimum age of 21, with 93 percent

support. Others: Republicans, 68 percent; independents, 77 percent; men, 67 percent; women, 88 percent; people in households with guns, 69 percent; city residents, 78 percent; suburban residents, 80 percent; and rural residents 74 percent.

Even though pollsters found majorities supporting a variety of gun restrictions, people who responded didn't identify that as the best way to reduce gun violence in schools.

Given a choice actions, 51 percent picked increased security at school entrances as doing the most to prevent gun violence in schools. Stricter gun laws was the top choice of 32 percent, and arming teachers was the top choice of 12 percent.

Increased school security was by far the leading choice of almost every group. One exception: Democrats, of whom 59 percent said stricter gun laws would do the most.

Florida Voters Support Assault Weapons Ban, Oppose Arming Teachers

By Martin Vassolo And David Smiley

Miami Herald, February 28, 2018

A clear majority of Florida voters support a nationwide ban on assault weapons and oppose arming teachers or school officials, according to a poll released Wednesday.

A Quinnipiac University poll released Wednesday found that 62 percent of voters favor a ban on assault weapons, and about two-thirds support "stricter gun laws," like universal background checks or a ban on the sale of high-capacity ammunition magazines, while 56 percent oppose arming faculty members.

The results closely mirror those from a separate poll conducted by Florida Atlantic University's Business and Economic Polling Initiative and also released Wednesday.

The results of the Quinnipiac poll, which queried 1,156 self-identified registered voters, are largely split among party lines, with less than half of Republicans approving of the assault weapons ban compared to 86 percent of Democrats, and 72 percent of Republicans in favor of allowing faculty members to carry firearms on school grounds compared to 11 percent of Democrats.

The poll was conducted between Feb. 23-26, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.6 percentage points. It comes two weeks after a teenager used an AR-15-style rifle to kill 17 students and faculty members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland.

The results provide the latest look at how Florida voters feel about guns in the wake of the shooting, and how that compares to legislation moving in Tallahassee, where lawmakers in both the House and Senate are considering proposals to train and arm select school faculty but have

voted against a push by Democrats to ban the sale of assault-style weapons.

A poll released last week by state Senate Republicans also showed Florida voters support an assault weapons ban.

On Tuesday, the Florida House Appropriations Committee approved a bill that would allow trained teachers to carry guns in class if superintendents or school boards approve. Also included in the bill is a three-day waiting period for gun purchases, raising the age to buy any gun to 21 and giving police more authority to confiscate guns from people who threaten themselves or others. The Senate Appropriations Committee approved a similar bill later Tuesday.

Eighty-seven percent of voters favor a mandatory waiting period on all gun purchases, 78 percent agree with raising the minimum age for purchase and 89 percent favor allowing police or family members to petition a judge to remove guns from a person who may be at risk of violent behavior, according to the Quinnipiac poll.

"Increased security at school entrances," 51 percent of voters said, would do more to reduce gun violence in schools. About a third of respondents disagreed, saying stricter gun laws would be more effective, and 12 percent said armed teachers is the answer.

"Floridians are strongly united that more needs to be done to rein in guns, especially the type of gun used this month to massacre 17 people in Parkland," Peter A. Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Poll, said in a statement. "These numbers show remarkable agreement across the electorate, the kind not seen very often these days."

FAU's Business and Economic Polling Initiative found that nearly 70 percent of people in the state want to see a ban on the sale of assault-style weapons and support stricter gun laws. More than 87 percent support universal background checks and nearly 78 percent support raising the minimum age to buy a rifle to 21 from the current 18.

The poll, an online and automated-phone query of 800 people, was conducted Feb. 23-25.

Close to 38 percent of those queried in the poll identified as Democrats, and slightly more than 35 percent identified as Republicans, and 41 percent said they own a gun.

In the Quinnipiac poll, 32 percent of those queried identified as Democrats and 30 percent as Republicans.

The findings come six months before primary elections for U.S. Senate, governor, and a slew of other state and local offices. The Quinnipiac poll shows that a majority of Florida voters are split on how Gov. Rick Scott and Sen. Bill Nelson have handled the issue of gun violence, while a majority disapprove of Sen. Marco Rubio's and President Donald Trump's handling of the issue.

"Gun control may turn out to be a pivotal issue in the midterm elections and could well be the difference in a close race for the Senate between Rick Scott and Bill Nelson," Kevin Wagner, a political science professor and research fellow of the Initiative, said in a statement. "While large majorities of Floridians support background checks and an increase in the age requirement, it is not at all clear that there is sufficient support for these measures in the Florida Legislature. As we are already late in the session, it will take a serious push by Gov. Scott to pass any of these reforms this year."

Polls Show Most Florida Voters Spurn Many NRA-backed Policies Of GOP-led Legislature

By Marc Caputo

Politico, February 28, 2018

MIAMI — From supporting an assault weapons ban to opposing armed teachers in class, Florida voters reject many of the NRA-backed policies of the GOP-led state Legislature, according to a new poll that found 65 percent favored stricter gun laws overall.

The Quinnipiac University poll began a week after 17 people were fatally shot at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., and was finished just as state legislators approved similar House and Senate bills that called for a three-day wait and 21-year-old age limit for long gun purchases as well as programs to arm teachers and provide \$400 million in spending to harden schools from attack and provide more mental health care.

In three separate committees, Democrats tried and failed to amend the bill to ban tactical rifles, or assault weapons. But Republicans prevailed and kept the measure out and also eschewed banning high-volume ammunition magazines.

The poll, however, shows that Florida voters favor an assault weapons ban, 62-33 percent, and a large majority, 62-34 percent, want large-volume magazines banned. They also oppose arming teachers by 56-40 percent. By 78-20 percent, they want all gun buyers to be 21 or older and by 87-10 percent they support waiting periods for all gun buys. Currently, there is no waiting period for buying a long gun, which can be purchased by an 18-year-old.

The NRA's position on each of those issues is in the minority.

The relatively minor gun control provisions in the various plans of from the House, Senate or governor are supported by majorities of Republicans in the poll. Those gun control items not favored by Republicans, such as a ban on assault weapons or high-capacity magazines are not in the plans — a sign that the proposals were crafted by Republican lawmakers keenly aware of the threat of a primary challenge on their right flank.

But from a general election perspective, Republicans and the NRA could face trouble in November if the poll numbers hold.

"Obviously, pro-gun people face a task that is, by historical standards, unusually challenging," said Peter Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Poll. "We live in a sharply divided country politically. But we're not divided on guns."

Still, there's nuance.

Ryan Petty, whose 14-year-old daughter Alaina was murdered Feb. 14, said he doesn't favor an assault-weapons ban and he said he hopes the debate about what happened in Parkland doesn't become focused on firearms.

"The problem is we're so entrenched in our positions, we impugn the motives of the other side. That's how polarized we are. This time it must be different. We have to focus on school safety and fund mental health," said Petty, who is advocating for Gov. Rick Scott's proposal, which doesn't call for arming teachers and spends \$500 million for bolstering school security and adds more for mental health treatment and counseling.

"You can't solve this with a single new law — ban assault weapons — then they [shooters] move on to another weapon. We need to harden the schools. We need to fix that. And we have to deal with mental health issues. These school shooters need help before they turn," Petty said.

The poll shows that the focus on schools over guns is favored by a majority of Floridians; 51 percent said "increased security at school entrances" would do more to reduce school gun violence, while 32 percent favored stricter gun laws, and only 12 percent saw arming teachers as the best solution.

Florida voters, 89-8 percent, favor a process that would allow police or family members to get a court order to remove guns from a violent person — a provision backed by Scott and the Florida Senate — and by 92-6 percent they favor banning gun ownership for someone who has had a restraining order for stalking or domestic violence.

The findings are similar to a Florida Atlantic University survey, released Wednesday, that found 56 percent of voters opposed arming teachers. Only 31 percent supported it. Democrats were most opposed, by 74 to 16 percent, followed by independents, who opposed it 57 to 26 percent. Republicans, reflecting the sentiments of the Republican-led Legislature, President Donald Trump and the NRA, support the idea 53 to 37 percent in the FAU survey, which was conducted with automated "robopollling" technology and online interviews of 800 voters.

By 69-23 percent, Florida voters in the FAU survey supported banning "assault-style" weapons.

Contrary also to the NRA — but in line with Scott and the Legislature — 78 percent of Florida voters supported raising the minimum age to buy a gun from 18 to 21. The survey didn't note, however, that handgun buyers already

have to be 21 in Florida but buyers of shotguns and rifles can be 18.

Scott, who broke with the NRA over the 21-year age limit, has started to soften some of his political posturing over firearms ahead of a possible bid against Sen. Bill Nelson, who supports a ban on tactical or "assault" rifles. Quinnipiac's Senate race poll showed Nelson was winning by about 4 points and FAU's survey had Scott down by 2 points.

In Quinnipiac's poll, voters overall said a Senate candidate's support for Trump would make them less likely to vote for that politician by 42-23 percent. In FAU's survey, Floridians disapproved of President's Trump's response to the recent mass shooting by 49-34 percent. Also, it found, support for the NRA was also a drag on Scott.

"The bad news for Scott is his A+ rating from the National Rifle Association (NRA) makes 44 percent of voters less likely to vote for him and only 26 percent more likely," said Monica Escaleras, director of FAU's Business and Economics Polling Initiative. "A deeper dive into these numbers also finds Independents less likely to vote for Scott, 43 to 17 percent, because of his NRA rating."

The FAU poll also found that 39 percent said the availability of guns was a major factor contributing to mass shootings, 24 percent selected a lack of mental health care and 18 percent attributed it most to violent media and video games.

The FAU survey also found that the most popular measure, so-called universal background checks for all gun buyers is supported by 87 percent. All of Florida's three mass shooters — at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, the Fort Lauderdale airport and Parkland high school — legally bought their firearms and passed a background check.

Editorial: Why Teachers Should Not Carry Guns

Tampa (FL) Tribune, February 28, 2018

Florida parents should not send their kids to school wondering whether the math teacher, the kindergarten teacher or the football coach secretly carries a gun. Yet the Florida Legislature appears poised to approve a risky scheme that envisions 10 armed teachers in every school who are prepared to respond to a mass shooter. This flawed response to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School massacre would make schools more dangerous, undermine relationships between students and teachers, and transform campuses into armed encampments awaiting the next attack.

Arming teachers is one portion of a wide-ranging package aimed at fortifying schools and calming Floridians shaken by the Feb. 14 shootings that killed 17 at Douglas High in Parkland. There are positives in the legislation, such as raising the age to buy all guns to 21, adding armed school resource officers and spending more on mental health. There

are errors of omission that should be corrected by adding bans on the sales of semiautomatic assault rifles like the one used at Douglas High. But the most serious error of commission is including the new path for arming teachers.

Republican legislative leaders ignore the opposition of Democrats, teachers and even the Douglas High survivors and families of those killed by pushing the plan to arm teachers. Under this legislation, predictably backed by the National Rifle Association, teachers who completed 132 hours of training could carry concealed weapons at school under the guidance of the county sheriff. There also would be a public records exemption to keep secret which teachers have guns. It's no surprise that one opinion poll released Wednesday shows Florida voters oppose arming teachers by 56 percent to 40 percent.

Teachers enter their profession to teach kids, just as law enforcement officers choose to protect citizens by force if necessary. No amount of training will prepare teachers to grab their gun and respond to a mass shooting, and the potential for deadly unintended consequences is enormous. It is entirely reasonable to add more armed resource officers in schools, but it is unreasonable to force every county sheriff to create a training program for arming teachers in case the local school district wants them.

Many students who embrace teachers as mentors and role models would eye all of them with new suspicion, since which teachers had guns would be secret. Minority students who already are disciplined disproportionately and often coached by parents to be cautious around police would be particularly affected. And there is no guarantee a teacher would not be tempted to reach for his or her gun to break up fights or in other situations that fall short of mass shootings.

This knee-jerk reaction to a tragedy would inject the debate over guns into every local school board election. Whether to arm teachers could become a litmus test for school board candidates and for hiring and firing school superintendents. Do Floridians want the NRA involved in school board races that should be about improving academic excellence?

House Speaker Richard Corcoran proudly vows to end schools as "gun-free zones." The Land O'Lakes Republican also wants to give private school tuition vouchers to kids who are bullied. Since he's all about guns and school choice, he should advocate handing tuition vouchers to families who do not want to send their child to a public school where the third-grade teacher secretly carries a gun.

Poll: Voters Support Arming Teachers After Florida School Shooting

By AWR Hawkins

Breitbart, February 28, 2018

A February 22-26 poll conducted by Morning Consult/Politico shows that voters support arming teachers in the wake of the Florida school shooting.

The margin of support was 50% to 42%.

The poll also found that voters support "protecting the right of Americans to own guns" over "limiting gun ownership" by a margin of 46% to 42%.

On February 27 Breitbart News reported a Rasmussen survey that showed Americans blamed government rather than guns for the Florida school shooting.

According to Rasmussen, 54% of Americans believe government failure is to "blame for the mass shooting." Only 33% of Americans blame guns. Eleven percent of Americans say they are unsure what contributed to the occurrence of the mass shooting.

When the group of respondents was narrowed to so as to only include those "who have children of elementary or secondary school age," the percentage of Americans who cite government failure as causal jumped to 61 and the percentage who blamed guns dropped to 23.

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His Daughter Was Killed In Parkland. He's Begging President Trump To Protect Those Who Survived.

By Herman Wong

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

The father of a 14-year-old girl who was gunned down in Parkland, Fla., has called on President Trump to address threats against student survivors and their families — many of whom have been outspoken about their desire for tighter gun-control laws since the deadly shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Some have been harassed (or worse) by gun-rights advocates; others have become the target of viral lies and even death threats.

On Wednesday, as students returned to school for the first time since the horrific shooting that left 17 people dead, Fred Guttenberg spoke to CNN about the occasionally vicious attacks against the survivors.

"There's been threats against some of these kids and their families," said Guttenberg, whose daughter, Jaime, was among the victims.

"We need our President Trump today to address it publicly and demand that everyone who is making these threats stop," he said.

He said he hoped the FBI, Broward County Sheriff's Office and other authorities were investigating the threats — "and initiating arrests."

"This community has been through trauma," Guttenberg said. "We can't have additional trauma in this community.... We need to get something done."

He added: "Trump, make an announcement."

Father of Florida school shooting victim on the threats being made against student survivors: "I need President Trump today to address it publicly and demand that everyone who is making these threats stop... This community has been through trauma... Trump: make an announcement." pic.twitter.com/lQPGvA6CV— CNN (@CNN) February 28, 2018

Since the shooting, some student survivors have pushed for tougher gun-control laws, traveling to Tallahassee and Washington in an attempt to discuss gun-control efforts with legislators. They also have been tangling with conservative critics and trolls on Twitter and organizing a nationwide march.

Their activism has made them targets, and conspiracy theories have alleged that the vocal students are "crisis actors."

There have been threats, too: Cameron Kasky, a junior at the school, wrote last week that he was leaving Facebook temporarily because "the death threats from the @NRA cultists are a bit more graphic than those on twitter."

Rebecca Boldrick, whose 17-year-old son David Hogg has become one of the school's most prominent student-activists since the shooting, said she had initially scoffed at the conspiracy theories.

But then the family started receiving death threats, she told The Washington Post.

"I'm under so much stress," she said a week after the shooting. "I'm angry and exhausted. Angry, exhausted and extremely proud."

The major social media platforms have also responded to harassment against the students.

"Such behavior goes against everything we stand for at Twitter, and we are taking action on any content that violates our terms of service," the company tweeted.

Trump doesn't always respond to public pressure to speak out about interactions between Americans — but he has done so on occasion.

Most notably, in late 2016, after the election, "60 Minutes" correspondent Lesley Stahl asked the president-elect about a reported spike in incidents of racial intimidation and harassment across the country.

And for the first time, Trump addressed reports of hate crimes committed in his name.

"I am so saddened to hear that. And I say: Stop it," Trump told Stahl. "If it, if it helps. I will say this, and I will say right to the cameras: Stop it."

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment about Guttenberg's statement.

On the day of the shooting, Guttenberg posted on Facebook that he found his son but could not reach his daughter.

The next morning, he wrote that his "heart was broken." He and his wife had "lost our baby girl to a violent shooting at her school."

"Hugs to all and hold your children tight," he wrote.

Since then, he has taken on a prominent role among Parkland parents.

At CNN's emotionally charged town hall on gun violence last week, Guttenberg confronted Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) on the lawmaker's gun-control stance.

"I want to like you," Guttenberg told the senator. "Here's the problem. And, I'm a brutally honest person, so I'm just going to say it up front.

"Your comments this week, and those of our president, have been pathetically weak."

On Wednesday, Guttenberg talked about returning to Stoneman Douglas without his daughter.

"My son walks in here without his sister," he told CNN. "My daughter's friends walk in there. They used to always walk in with my daughter ... and they're walking in there without her."

Hugs, Tears And Police: High School Reopens After Shooting

By Kelli Kennedy, Terry Spencer And Josh Repleglio
Associated Press, February 28, 2018

PARKLAND, Fla. (AP) — Students and teachers hugged and cried Wednesday as they returned under heavy police guard to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High for the first time since a teenager with an assault rifle killed 17 people and thrust the huge Florida school into the center of a renewed national gun debate.

The half-day began with fourth period so that the nearly 3,300 students could first be with the people they were with during the shooting two weeks ago.

"In the beginning, everyone was super serious, but then everyone cheered up and it started being the same vibes we had before the shooting. People started laughing and joking around," said Kyle Kashuv, a junior who said he hugged every single teacher.

On the way in, teens were guarded by hundreds of police officers. The police were accompanied by comfort animals, including dogs, horses and a donkey. One of the horses had "eagle pride" painted on its side. A nearby woman held a sign offering "free kisses."

After school dismissed, members of the Guardian Angels wearing their trademark red berets lined the streets at a crosswalk.

Kashuv said he was amazed by the outpouring of support from the community, including the police presence, the animals and many well-wishers. There were letters from all over the world and "banners on every single wall," he said.

There's heavy security at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School as classes resumed for the first time since 17 students and teachers were killed by a teenager with an AR-15, thrusting them into the center of the nation's gun debate. (Feb. 28)

Some of the officers carried military-style rifles, and Superintendent Robert Runcie said the police presence would continue for the remainder of the school year. The heavy arms rattled some students.

"This is a picture of education in fear in this country." The National Rifle Association "wants more people just like this, with that exact firearm, to scare more people and sell more guns," said David Hogg, who has become a leading voice in the student movement to restrict assault weapons.

About 150 grief counselors were on campus "to provide a lot of love, a lot of understanding" and to help students "ease back" into their school routines, Runcie said.

The freshman building where the Feb. 14 massacre took place remained cordoned off.

Students were told leave their backpacks at home. Principal Ty Thomas tweeted that the school's focus would be on "emotional readiness and comfort, not curriculum."

In each classroom, colored pencils, coloring books, stress balls and toys were available to help students cope.

"It's not how you go down. It's how you get back up," said Casey Sherman, a 17-year-old junior. She said she was not afraid to be return, "just nervous."

Many students said the debate over new gun laws helped them process the traumatic event and prepared them to return.

Alexis Grogan, a 15-year-old sophomore, was concerned that it might be too soon to go on as usual without slain friends such as Luke Hoyer, who sat two seats behind her in Spanish class.

"Seeing everyone was good, but emotionally I was in shambles. I probably broke down into tears 10-plus times and had to walk out of my classes multiple times throughout the day," she said.

As classes resumed, Dick's Sporting Goods, a major U.S. retailer, announced that it would immediately halt sales of assault-style rifles and high-capacity magazines at all of its stores and ban the sale of all guns to anyone under 21. The company's CEO took on the NRA by demanding tougher gun laws.

At the Florida Capitol, a House committee voted Tuesday in favor of a bill to raise the minimum age to buy

long guns from 18 to 21 and to create a program allowing teachers to carry concealed weapons in classrooms if their school district allows it. Those teachers would receive law-enforcement training and get deputized by the local sheriff's office.

State lawmakers continued their investigation of how the suspected shooter, Nikolas Cruz, managed to slip through local law enforcement despite previous warning signs.

The Florida House voted Wednesday to subpoena records from Broward County and the school board, as well as sheriff's offices in Broward and Palm Beach counties and the city of Coral Springs. Among items requested from the school were documents on a mentoring program aimed at alternatives to the juvenile justice system. Critics have suggested the program led to lenience for Cruz, but the superintendent said Wednesday that the suspect was never part of the program.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott said he hopes a gun and school-safety bill is passed before the annual legislative session ends March 9. The measures he proposed did not include arming teachers, but he declined to say Tuesday whether he would veto a sweeping package that includes that provision.

The Broward superintendent has spoken out against the idea of arming teachers.

Marion Hammer, a lobbyist for the National Rifle Association and Unified Sportsmen of Florida, said she supports school security and keeping guns out of the hands of the mentally ill, but "guns are not the problem."

Kashuv said he was most moved by a tattoo his teacher got that said "MSD Strong" with a giant eagle.

"The shooting doesn't define us," he said. "We're really moving past it and trying to heal right now."

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Stoneman Douglas Students Return; 'It Was Odd But It Was Also Calming'

By Scott Travis, Lois K. Solomon, Anne Geggis
South Florida Sun Sentinel, February 27, 2018

They took their first steps toward normalcy — or at least a new normal — on Wednesday.

Surrounded by a heavy police presence, students returned to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High for the first time since a gunman killed 17 students and staff on Valentine's Day.

"It was odd but it was also calming," said senior Anisha Saripalli, 17, who lost her friend Carmen Schentrup. "I just tried not to look at the building at all."

She said the students worked on puzzles and played with Play Doh and board games.

But first they observed 17 seconds of silence in first period, one for each victim.

The students were given goodies, like bagels and cream cheese, and comfort from 40 therapy dogs. And there were hugs all around.

Superintendent Robert Runcie said 95 percent of students, or 3,123 out of about 3,300, showed up.

"I thought that was outstanding," he said.

He said every high school principal from the school district was there, as well Stoneman Douglas' first principal, Ben Arculeo. The school opened in 1990.

"It was heartwarming to see the students and staff were so united and to see all the support from the community," School Board member Robin Bartleman said. "There were flowers and banners everywhere. It just restored my faith in humanity."

The school day started at fourth period, the time when school ended at on February 14. Each class was a half hour.

"Every class went by in a second," said Ben Galper, a 15-year-old freshman.

He said he was ready to reenter the freshman building out of habit and then had to change course when he realized he could no longer go in that building — the site of the mass shooting.

"I had to walk to the other side of the school," he said.

Tanzil Philip, 16, a 10th grader, went back to the closet where he hid during that day he'll never forget.

"We needed to sit there and tell ourselves we are safe," he said.

The hardest part for Sara Giovanello, 17, a junior, was looking at the empty seat where a slain classmate once sat.

"I started crying and I didn't get over it for three periods," she said.

There were 150 grief counselors on hand from districts all over Florida and Katherine Dadd, 17, a junior, left her psychology class to meet with one.

Her neighbor since 2003 — Helena Ramsay — was one of the gunman's victims. The pair would meet up in the band hallway at the end of every school day and walk to North Community Park, where Ramsay's mom would pick them up.

She "has been my friend my whole life, like a sister," Dadd said.

She said she keeps expecting to see her, but then reality hits again.

Noelle Kaiser, 17 and a junior, said it was hard watching the teachers try not to cry.

"They were trying to be strong for us," she said.

When the students poured out of the school at 11:40 a.m., many were clutching flowers and stuffed animals, including eagles, the school mascot.

They had to dodge a barrage of cameras and media. And that clearly irritated some students, who held clothing over their faces.

Hundreds of police officers from dozens of agencies — including a contingency from New York — had surrounded the school early Wednesday to ensure the students felt safe and protected.

Rod Skirvin, vice president of the Police Benevolent Association in Broward, gave out 1,000 carnations as the students crossed Pine Island Road to enter the school.

"It's something gentle, something refreshing. You can't frown at a flower," he said.

Also there to provide protection: The Florida chapter of the Guardian Angels, wearing their signature red jackets and caps.

"We want people to feel safe and secure that we're here," said chapter leader David Cobra Clemente.

But student Noah Sacks said he was uncomfortable with the enormous police presence.

"I felt nervous with all the rifles, they scare me," he said.

Mackenzie Chapman, a 16-year-old junior, had the opposite reaction.

"I feel safe, especially with that number of cops, she said. "It's crazy."

Jason Shatzkamer was at a crosswalk, waiting for his daughter Kacie to come out of school. He was at the same intersection two weeks ago, getting texts from Kacie about the shooting.

Kacie was in Scott Beigel's classroom at the time. Beigel was one of the 17 people killed that day.

But instead of feeling panic and fear like he did on Feb. 14, Shatzkamer said he felt relieved Wednesday knowing his daughter was around to talk about the tragedy.

"She's OK physically, but otherwise, it's still fairly new, Shatzkamer said.

Caesar Figueroa, of Parkland, father of two Stoneman Douglas students, stood across the street holding a bouquet of flowers and a card with \$100 in gift cards for the teacher his kids never had for class but who will always have his gratitude: Mrs. Gilliam.

His daughter, Gabriella, a junior, was out of class when the Code Red was declared. The first locked door she knocked on wasn't answered, but Kathy Gilliam, a math teacher, opened her door.

"She saved my daughter's life," he said.

Megan O'Matz and Scott Travis

Alek Pacocha, 17, a junior who was in the vicinity of the shooting, said the hardest part of being back will be doing the schoolwork.

"We're so far behind. I don't know how we'll catch up," he said.

Still, the students will be on a shortened four-hour day all week to help them transition back, district officials said.

Runcie had offered a message of hope in a tweet on Wednesday morning.

"I pray that today is the beginning of our long and difficult journey from grief, sorrow and anger to a new consciousness of hope, compassion and love," he said. "Thank you to our young people for leading the way. Welcome Back! #MSDStrong #NeverAgain"

Around the school, neighbors lined sidewalks and posters let students know "You've got this" and "We are with you."

Jeannine Gittens and her son, Jevon, 16, moved to Coral Springs five months ago to stay with friends after Hurricane Maria ravaged the U.S. Virgin Islands, where she was living.

"It was just basic insanity, and you come here trying to get your life organized and this happens," she said.

Jevon was in the building where the shooting happened, she said.

"By the grace of God, he was saved," she said. "One of the students who was shot ran into the classroom while they were taking a math class and yelled, 'I'm shot! I'm shot!' The math teacher sprang into action and locked the door, and that's probably why all the kids in that particular class were not injured."

Gittens said she felt comfortable sending Jevon back to school.

"The kids are resilient, and I think in the past two weeks the school has rallied families and created a big support group," she said. "The school is amazing."

Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel announced last week that deputies guarding schools in Broward will carry rifles, including AR-15s, the type of gun Nikolas Cruz used in the massacre.

Cruz, a former student at Marjory Douglas, is charged with 17 counts of murder and could face the death penalty.

The school district is reviewing long-term security plans for all schools, and Runcie said the district plans to ask the Legislature for money to hire more school-based police officers.

Runcie said he is trying to expedite the placement of fences, gates and barriers around school perimeters so people can enter a school campus only at the front office. The district may consider other measures, including bullet-proof windows on classroom doors.

Parkland Students Back In School After Shooting

By Alex Harris

Miami Herald, February 28, 2018

It wasn't a normal school day for the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, but it was a first step.

On Wednesday, students — most wearing clothes with the school's mascot (an eagle) or the school color (maroon) — made their way back to the campus that two weeks earlier became the site of the deadliest high school shooting in American history. They ducked a horde of TV cameras and reporters, weaved past well-wishers dropping off flowers and posters at the memorial for the 17 victims and passed hundreds of law enforcement officers who showed up to offer support, some from as far away as New York.

Despite the anxiety many students felt, roughly 95 percent of the school's nearly 3,300 students came to class.

When they passed through the gates of the school's fence, now a mosaic of signs offering messages of support, the world inside was just as surreal.

"We were just trying to re-instill the sense of normalcy that we all had before," said Kai Koerber, 17. "Because at the end of the day, life has to go on, and it doesn't mean we forget the people we knew before."

The focus of the day, as Principal Ty Thompson tweeted Tuesday evening, was on "emotional readiness and comfort not curriculum."

The school day began with fourth period, the class during which the shooting took place. On the morning announcements, school staff thanked the students who came to school on the first day back and praised their bravery. They observed 17 seconds of silence for each of the victims of the Feb. 14 shooting and played the school's alma mater.

In some classrooms, the empty desks where the slain victims of the massacre once sat were turned into memorials. Koerber's Advanced Placement Language Composition teacher draped one in velvet cloth with a teddy bear in the seat.

"Words cannot describe how painful it is to see an empty seat," he said. "You never want to see that in your class. It's unreal."

Another empty desk had a new message written on it — "You Matter #MSDStrong."

The freshman building where the gunman opened fire is now a crime scene. It's fenced off from the rest of campus, and the fence is covered in posters and art people from around the world sent to Marjory Stoneman Douglas.

Teachers, parents and students alike hope classes are never held inside again. The school district has said it plans to demolish the building and replace it with a memorial, and Florida legislators have promised to help build new classrooms.

In the meantime, school administrators have reorganized class schedules to accommodate the approximately 900 students who attended class in the building.

Freshman Larah Haberland, who had six of her eight classes in the freshman building and left some of her notebooks there, had an entirely new schedule today with

new classroom assignments in different buildings. There were many students in similar circumstances.

Some of the new class schedules had a painful reminder from two weeks ago — Scott Beigel, a geography teacher who was killed during the shooting, was still listed as a teacher. Larah's geography class is now taught by another teacher who volunteered to cover one of Beigel's classes.

"I just feel weird to be back at school and sometimes sad because of the people who are not there anymore," Larah said.

Senior Taylor Morales said a different classroom made it easier to face returning to campus.

"For some reason whenever I thought of going to class it was still in that room," she said. "The fact that it wasn't even close to that room and didn't resemble that room — it really relaxed me."

Read more: "She endured 6 minutes of terror, steps away from the shooter. Now she returns to school."

In band class, students talked about what happened, about hiding for hours in the closet, before pulling out guitars and learning how to play "Tears in Heaven" by Eric Clapton, said 15-year-old Liam Kiernan.

In another English class, the teacher handed out a notebook and asked students to write messages to one of their former classmates, 14-year-old Cara Loughran. Alishba Hashmi, 14, said her teacher told the class she planned to give the notebook to the Loughran family, because all the rest of Cara's schoolwork is locked inside the freshman building.

There were also 150 counselors on campus — and, of course, dozens of therapy dogs.

"You could hug and kiss them," said 17-year-old Emmanuel Correa. "It was really nice."

In 18-year-old Taylor's study hall, one less student was present. Nicholas Dworet, a senior and a swimmer with Olympic aspirations, was among the 17 victims.

A school therapist talked the students through their grief, inviting them to cry if they wanted to cry and support each other.

The therapist told them their situation was like a snow globe: All the snowflakes are settled at the bottom until something thrusts each of them into chaos. They'll settle at the bottom again, but never in the same place as before.

As some of her classmates wept, Taylor tried to keep her composure.

"You see how hard it is for some people — a lot of us — to be there," Taylor said. "But we are still in class. We are all trying."

Classmates also showed off tattoos, etched on their bodies in the two weeks since the shooting. One girl got a daisy with 17 petals. Someone else got an eagle, Douglas' mascot, on their right upper shoulder blade with the name of a victim, Gina Montalto. Another student got victim Joaquin

Oliver's name on his bicep. And several people got variations of the date of the shooting, MSD strong or MSD forever.

Teachers passed out letters of support from students around the country, some of which the authors signed with their social media usernames and an offer to talk about what happened anytime. Christopher Powell, 17, walked off campus Wednesday afternoon holding three of them — one a piece of blue paper shaped like a fish and another a half-colored page from a coloring book.

"I'm gonna [contact] them and I'm gonna leave a message, a thank you," he said. "The fact that everyone knows who we are and they understand the pain that we're feeling right now, it definitely helps. I appreciate it a lot."

After school ended for the day, Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie also talked about the outpouring of support the community has received.

"We've seen the worst of humanity, but we've also seen that followed by incredible acts of kindness and support from throughout Broward County and across the world, and we're extremely grateful for that," he said.

Although most students returned to Stoneman Douglas on Wednesday, Runcie said that the roughly 170 who stayed home won't be penalized. Only 15 students have asked for information about transferring to a new school, something the district has previously said they're happy to help with. Four employees out of 215 have asked about working somewhere else.

Like Wednesday, the rest of the school week will be half days for students to ease the transition back to a full schedule.

Returning to the scene of a tragedy two weeks later can be psychologically fraught for some kids, but for most children it's actually helpful, said Jonathan Comer, the Director of the Mental Health Interventions and Technology Program at Florida International University.

"After traumatic events, we typically encourage families and schools to return to their familiar structure and daily routines as quickly as possible," he said. "Familiarity goes a long way in fostering a sense of return to normalcy and predictability."

Although Runcie said the first day back felt like "a family reunion," he acknowledged that it will be impossible to return to normal. "We know that things will never, ever be the same, but we're going to try to make sure that we can figure out how to move forward," he said.

And for some students, that means taking on a new identity: survivor.

"It's a weird thing to call yourself a survivor," said 16-year-old Ramis Hashmi. "You never get used to that title."

Scared But Resilient, Stoneman Douglas Students Return To Class

By Jack Healy

New York Times, February 28, 2018

PARKLAND, Fla. — Brooke Harrison, 14, was still in a deep sleep when her mother knocked on her door and hugged her awake at 6:45 Wednesday morning. "You need to get up," she told her daughter. "You don't want to be late for school today."

It was the first day of class for Brooke and her classmates at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School since a mass shooting that killed 17 and forever upended thousands of lives across this South Florida suburb two weeks ago.

It had been two weeks of nightmares, funerals, flashbacks, vigils and grief counseling since the attack. But Brooke felt ready.

She had watched gunfire explode through her Honors English class that Feb. 14 afternoon as she and her classmates worked on an essay about hardship and education. Three students from her class alone were killed. She had heard their last breaths, crawled through glass and put pressure on a wounded student's torso before escaping through the school parking lot and running as fast as she could to reach her home in a subdivision lined by coconut palms.

Now, like many other Stoneman Douglas High students, Brooke just wanted to return to a routine. She wanted to see her friends and reclaim her school, which is ringed by police officers and garlanded by fading memorial flowers.

She was nervous, and she worried she would cry when she walked through the courtyard where she would sometimes eat lunch with Alaina Petty, who was killed in her classroom. Others said they dreaded confronting so many empty seats, or seeing the art project that a slain friend would never finish.

"I just hope she's going to be O.K. being there all day," Brooke's mother, Denise, said as she made coffee, toast and bacon for breakfast. "That it's not traumatic to be there."

But first, Brooke needed her mother to help unknot a pair of gray Nikes.

"I have no strength," she said as she walked into the kitchen, smiling and still wearing the same burgundy Stoneman Douglas shirt from the day before.

The bloodied shoes that Brooke had worn the day of the shooting had been taken away as evidence. Her favorite sweater was also seized. Her black backpack now has a bullet hole in the bottom, from one of the AR-15 rifle rounds that filled her English class with a choking haze and killed Alex Schachter, Alyssa Alhadef and Alaina before her eyes there in room 1216.

So on Wednesday, Brooke went back to school carrying little more than her phone and a small bracelet made by students that said "ALAINA."

The shortened school day started with fourth period, the class where everything had shattered. For 30 minutes, the students reunited with the classmates and teachers who had huddled with them in closets and corners. They spent 24 minutes in each of their other classes and were done by 11:40 a.m. Robert W. Runcie, the Broward schools superintendent, said about 95 percent of the student body of 3,293 had returned.

There were extra counselors and therapy dogs on hand, and it will be days — if not weeks — before students return to their regular lessons. The school's principal, Ty Thompson, said on Twitter that the focus of the week would be on healing, and classes are being dismissed at 11:40 a.m. for the rest of the week in an effort to let the students acclimate to being back.

"There is no need for backpacks," he wrote. "Come ready to start the healing process and #RECLAIM THE NEST."

Back at home that morning, it was 7:23 a.m. Time for Brooke to go.

"Are we ready?" Ms. Harrison asked.

"Yeah."

As they skimmed through the neighborhood in a white Hyundai S.U.V., past driveway basketball hoops, cyclists and joggers, Ms. Harrison remembered how she had driven the same route two weeks earlier to find Brooke after the shooting.

Many parents had exchanged frantic text messages with their children as they hid in their classrooms, but Brooke's class was one of the first to be attacked. When she and her friends poured out of the school, they grabbed cellphones from strangers and broke the news to their parents. Brooke's mother found her shaken near their subdivision.

That day, Brooke and two friends had sat at her house and feverishly tried to confirm which of their friends was safe. They sent group text messages asking who was missing and who had been found. They posted photos on social media. They knew, before any names were officially released or parents were notified, which of their friends were not coming home.

Brooke still flashes back to the shadow of the gunman passing by their classroom door. "I'll just see him," she said. These past two weeks, she found some escape in a high school romance novel and rewatched "101 Dalmatians" and other Disney movies from her childhood.

Her parents tried to calibrate when to hold her close and when to give her space. Ms. Harrison said she would quietly try to check in by calling Brooke to ask if she wanted a drink from Starbucks or needed anything from Target. And when Brooke declined to attend her 12-year-old brother's birthday party, she reminded her mother that she sometimes just needed to be alone.

On Wednesday, traffic around the school slowed to a crawl as Brooke and her mother drew close. They passed heavily armed police officers and television cameras. Students walked through a colonnade of police officers from nearby cities and teachers from their old middle and elementary schools who waved signs of support.

"Welcome back, welcome back," one sheriff's deputy said.

"I feel like I'm on an episode of 'C.S.I.,'" Brooke said.

"How is this our school?" her mother asked. "How is this happening?"

Ms. Harrison's voice trembled. "This is unbelievable. It's making me sad."

"Mom, please don't cry."

They pulled into a circular driveway, near a banner that declared "WELCOME EAGLES" — their school team name. Inside, over the course of this half-day, there would be hugs and joyful reunions laced with sadness and loss. Some students would break down crying as they said the Pledge of Allegiance. Others would wipe away tears when they heard the alma mater. They would compare their memories, nuzzle therapy dogs and share their final text messages from now-absent friends.

"We were just so happy to see each other," Brooke would say.

But not quite yet. Brooke and her mother quickly hugged, kissed and said I love you. And then the 14-year-old freshman who dreams about one day whirling across the globe as a travel journalist hopped out of her mom's car, threaded her way past a sheriff's officer and joined the river of children in burgundy T-shirts making their way back in.

Guns Are Allowed At The Florida Strawberry Festival. Beer, Bottled Water And Pets Are Not.

By Jay Cridlin

Tampa (FL) Tribune, February 28, 2018

PLANT CITY — You can't buy a beer at the Florida Strawberry Festival. You can't bring a bottle of water or a dog that's not a service animal.

You can, however, sit in the front row of a Reba McEntire concert with a Smith & Wesson holstered to your chest.

You can ride the Space Roller with a handgun. You can meet the Strawberry Queen with a handgun. You can stand atop the festival's new \$5.5 million concert amphitheater and look down on the stage, midway or basketball courts at neighboring Tomlin Middle School, all with a concealed carry permit and a gun you brought from home.

"We do not encourage you to bring your weapon on grounds," said Strawberry Festival president Paul Davis. "But if you have a legal right to do it, then you can do it."

Florida's gun laws are drawing nationwide scrutiny following a mass shooting that killed 17 at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. In recent years, concert and festival security has become a major industry issue after attacks that killed dozens in Paris, Las Vegas and Manchester, U.K.

Yet the Strawberry Festival, which opens Thursday and draws a half-million guests every year — including some 100,000 for its concerts alone — is literally and figuratively sticking to its guns.

"If a gun is found through any type of security check, we only verify that they have a right to carry it or not," said Cpl. Larry McKinnon of the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, which staffs off-duty officers at the festival gate.

The Strawberry Festival's gun policy is not posted on its website, and does not appear to be widely known outside the fair industry.

Among those unaware of the policy: Hillsborough County Public Schools. Tomlin Middle and Bryan Elementary both allow Strawberry Festival parking on their grounds, with proceeds benefitting the schools. But per Florida law, concealed weapons may not be carried on any school property. After learning of the Strawberry Festival's handgun policy, district spokesman Grayson Kamm said the schools would look into posting signs informing anyone who parks there of the policy.

"If you want to park at Bryan or Tomlin, you can't have a gun," Kamm said. "If you have a concealed carry permit, you should know the law. You should know that you can't carry it at a school. That said, it's very smart for us to remind people of that."

The Strawberry Festival's concealed-carry policy is in line with similar agriculture-based events across Florida, including the Florida State Fair. Such events are considered public spaces and must abide by the state's concealed carry law, which permits licensed firearms holders to bring in handguns.

The Strawberry Festival may be a community-run nonprofit running on its own land — but as a state-licensed "public fair," it is subject to the same regulations as the State Fair, which in 2012 ended its no-concealed-weapons policy, under threat of legal action from gun-rights activists. If the festival tried to bar concealed weapons, it could lose certain state protections and open itself to a lawsuit.

"Fair associations are unique statutory creatures," said Lance Fuchs, attorney for the Florida Federation of Fairs and Livestock Shows. "They could lose their fair charter or management team ... and could face civil and criminal penalties because they'd be knowingly violating the law."

What separates the Strawberry Festival from the State Fair and other events is its high-profile concert lineup, which in years past has drawn acts like Taylor Swift, Garth Brooks and Luke Bryan. No other major venue in Tampa Bay allows

firearms, from Amalie Arena to the MidFlorida Credit Union Amphitheatre to Ruth Eckerd Hall to the Dallas Bull. Anyone attempting to enter with a gun, and in some cases even a knife, will be turned away.

Bill Edwards, the St. Petersburg entrepreneur whose company operates the city-run Mahaffey Theater, has a concealed carry permit, but doesn't bring or allow guns in the theater or Al Lang Stadium.

"I leave mine in the car, where it belongs," he said. "Would you want to go someplace where somebody is carrying firearms? With your kids or your family to a cultural event? I can't imagine. Look at what's going on in this world."

In January, there 96,606 concealed-carry permit holders in Hillsborough County, and another 50,789 just across the county line in Polk. Concealed carry licenses only apply to handguns, not long guns and assault rifles used in many mass shootings, like the AR-15.

On Monday, the Times asked more than 20 headlining acts at this year's Strawberry Festival about the policy. Representatives for five responded: Justin Moore, Jerry Lee Lewis, Lee Greenwood, Engelbert Humperdinck and Charley Pride. All were unavailable or declined to comment. None had changed their plans to play Plant City.

"We're not out here making a political statement," said Davis, a retired Hillsborough County Sheriff's major. "There's a side that says you're more safe with guns, and there's a side that says you're not. We're not taking a side. We're doing our best to comply with state law and our regulations."

Music festivals that are not beholden to Florida's public fair laws, such as Tampa's Gasparilla Music Festival, typically forbid weapons of any kind.

"From our perspective, that was never a consideration," said David Cox, executive director of the Gasparilla Music Festival. "We just don't want that. We want people to be carefree and enjoying themselves."

The Florida Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence has opposed the right to carry concealed weapons in public gathering spaces like churches and college campuses. Co-Chairwoman Patricia Brigham sees an event like the Strawberry Festival as a "gray area."

"There's always a risk when you carry a concealed weapon into a big public event like that, especially one with a lot of children," she said.

Scott Barrish, a Republican activist and gun-rights advocate from Valrico who was involved in the State Fair's 2012 decision, didn't know about the festival's policy.

"I commend them for making that stand," said Barrish, 42, who hasn't been to the Strawberry Festival in years, but who carries his gun everywhere it's allowed. "More public venues should make that same stand."

In 2016, the festival instituted security wanding and bag checks, a measure Davis said was met with "overwhelming support." This year, they'll add walk-through metal detectors

known as magnetometers. The festival's perimeter is under 24-hour surveillance. And the absence of alcohol means a decreased potential for drunken fights.

"I understand with all the gun stuff that's going on right now, I think everybody is kind of concerned about where we're going and how we're going to get there," he said. "Depending on which side you're on, I think everybody's in favor of some strong checks, some stronger checks, and things of that nature. I just think when you come here, we need to just follow the letter of the law."

Still, Davis at times has "mixed emotions" about the policy, because he can envision a scenario in which things might go wrong. Undercover police officers patrol the festival grounds, he said, "and all of our uniform guys know who they are." If a guest starts trouble and needs to be subdued, the undercover officer might dive in and, if necessary, draw a weapon.

"They're not going to get shot by a policeman, hopefully," he said. "But a good citizen might not know that that's a good guy, you know what I'm saying? That's when you worry about those kinds of things."

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Teacher In Custody After Shot Fired At North Georgia High School

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, February 28, 2018

A North Georgia teacher, known as the longtime radio voice of Dalton High School football and basketball, is in custody after he fired at least one shot inside a classroom Wednesday, police said.

The incident at the high school, about 91 miles northwest of downtown Atlanta, sent panicked students running through hallways and alarmed parents who were already on edge in the wake of a mass shooting at a Florida high school earlier this month.

About 11:30 a.m. Wednesday, some students tried to get into Randal Davidson's classroom and he would not let them in, Dalton police spokesman Bruce Frazier said.

They alerted Principal Steve Bartoo. When he came to the door and used his key to try to open it, Davidson forcibly closed it on him, Frazier said.

At that point, Bartoo heard one gunshot. The bullet went through a window and outside, Frazier said. Police have not said what type of gun was used, only that it was a handgun.

"It's scary," Bartoo said in a news conference. "Real scary."

Bartoo said guns are not allowed on the Dalton campus.

The school has an assigned school resource officer, but at the time of the shooting he was at the junior high school

meeting with that school's officer, according to Dalton police Assistant Chief Cliff Cason.

Frazier said his officers responded within a matter of minutes.

"We had officers inside the building quickly," Frazier said.

Officers evacuated a hallway and secured the area first. During the evacuation, a female student was hurt, police said. That student is being treated by emergency officials for an ankle injury.

After about 30 to 45 minutes, authorities were able to get Davidson to surrender.

"I don't believe we've had any dealings with him before," Frazier said.

Cason said his department has interviewed Davidson and police don't plan to administer a mental health evaluation. "That's up to the courts," Cason said.

Davidson, a 53-year-old social studies teacher, has been at Dalton High since 2004. In 2012, he was recognized as the school's top teacher, according to Dalton Public Schools, which wrote about Davidson's non-traditional path to teaching in a profile that year.

"He's a good teacher," Bartoo said.

He moved to Dalton in 1995 and became sports and news director at WBLJ-AM radio, the district said.

The Georgia State Patrol is assisting police with the investigation.

The shooting occurred two weeks after 17 students and faculty members were killed inside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. Students returned to the school for the first time Wednesday.

During a listening session last week with parents and survivors of the rampage, President Donald Trump said if one of the victims, a football coach, had been armed "he would have shot and that would have been the end of it."

He followed that up with a tweet that suggested "armed educators (and trusted people who work within a school) ... should get yearly" bonuses.

"Shootings will not happen again," he wrote in the Twitter post. "A big & very inexpensive deterrent. Up to States."

In August, Lithia Springs High School closed after a teacher shot himself in his classroom office before students arrived. Jonathan Freeman, 43, fired one round from his own, recently acquired, handgun. He survived the shooting.

Parents at Dalton High were urged to stay away from the high school Wednesday and pick up their children at the Northwest Georgia Trade and Convention Center.

"Student safety is always our first priority," the district said in a Facebook post. "Please be patient with us as we implement our emergency plan in conjunction with the Dalton Police Department."

Teacher Taken Into Custody After Reports Of Shots Fired At Georgia School, Students Safe

By Debbie Truong

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

A teacher was taken into custody Wednesday after he fired at least one shot inside a Georgia classroom, police said.

Jesse Randall Davidson, a 53-year-old social studies teacher, barricaded himself inside a classroom at Dalton High School on Wednesday morning, according to Tweets from the Dalton Police Department.

One student who injured her ankle as the school was being evacuated was treated by medics at the school. No other children were injured or in danger, according to police. The George State Patrol also responded to the incident.

Police spokesman Bruce Frazier said students tried to enter a classroom about 11:30 a.m., but the teacher wouldn't allow them in, according to video of press conferences posted by WTVC-TV.

Davidson forced the door shut when the principal tried to open it. The teacher then fired a shot from a handgun through a window, Frazier said.

"Obviously, at that point, he locked down the school," Frazier said.

The shot did not appear to be aimed at anyone, Frazier said. Davidson surrendered less than an hour later. Parents were advised to meet their children at a convention center nearby. The school serves about 2,000 students, according to its website.

The alerts were particularly jarring on a day when much of the country watched students return to the high school in Parkland, Fla., where 17 people were gunned down on Valentine's Day.

DPD on scene at report of shot or shots fired at Dalton High. NO CHILDREN ARE INJURED OR IN DANGER— Dalton Police (@DaltonPD) February 28, 2018

There is a barricaded subject in a classroom. It is believed to be a teacher.— Dalton Police (@DaltonPD) February 28, 2018

PARENTS DO NOT COME TO DALTON HIGH— Dalton Police (@DaltonPD) February 28, 2018

Georgia Teacher In Custody After Police Say He Fired A Gun In Empty Classroom

By Doug Stanglin

USA Today, February 28, 2018

A social studies teacher who fired one shot from a handgun after barricading himself in an empty classroom at a Georgia high school was arrested Wednesday, police said.

Officers persuaded the teacher to surrender without incident after about 30 to 45 minutes, said Dalton, Ga., police spokesman Bruce Frazier.

"We had officers inside the building quickly," he said.

No one was injured aside from a female student who hurt her ankle while rushing to evacuate Dalton High School.

The incident occurred two weeks after a school shooting in neighboring Florida left 17 students and faculty dead, renewing the debate about gun control in the U.S. In the wake of that tragedy, President Trump and federal and state legislators have proposed arming teachers, a move backed by the National Rifle Association.

Frazier said the teacher, identified as Jesse Randal Davidson, 53, would be charged, although the exact nature of the charge was not immediately clear.

According to the school website, Davidson did the play-by-play for the Dalton High School as the "voice of the Catamounts" and has written a two-volume history of the team.

Davidson, who has taught at the school since 2004, apparently fired the handgun out the window and did not aim at anyone, Frazier said.

"I don't know if he fired the gun off to let people know to back off or what," he said.

Davidson had taught first period without incident or an indication of anything unusual, Frazier said. The shooting occurred during third period, when Davidson had a planning block.

"It certainly seems that he didn't have any intention to harm anyone else," Frazier said.

The ordeal unfolded after Davidson apparently refused to allow students into the classroom and barricaded the door.

A single shot ran out inside the room when the principal arrived to try unlocking the door. School officials evacuated the school and placed it on lockdown. Students were taken to the city's convention center, the school said on its Facebook page.

Police said no students were ever in danger. The school, which has about 2,000 students, is about 90 miles north of Atlanta.

Rep. Don Young Suggests Armed Jews Could Have Prevented The Holocaust

By Mike Debonis

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Rep. Don Young, an Alaska Republican who is the longest-serving member of the House of Representatives, recently argued against gun control to constituents by suggesting that Jews could have avoided perishing in the Holocaust if they had armed themselves.

"How many millions of people were shot and killed because they were unarmed?" Young said to the Alaska Municipal League in Juneau last week, according to a recording published Tuesday by Alaska Public Media. "Fifty million in Russia because their citizens weren't armed. How

many Jews were put into the ovens because they were unarmed?"

The claim that privately owned guns might have dissuaded the Nazi regime from genocide is a thinly founded idea with a long pedigree among supporters of gun rights. The Anti-Defamation League has tracked a rise since at least 2013 in rhetoric suggesting that guns could have stopped or at least slowed the Holocaust.

In one recent example, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson said in 2015, when he was a presidential candidate, that "the likelihood of Hitler being able to accomplish his goals would have been greatly diminished if the people had been armed."

The ADL said Wednesday in response to Young's remarks that it is "offensive for anyone to manipulate the history of the Holocaust to score political points."

"It is mind-bending to suggest that personal firearms in the hands of the small number of Germany's Jews (about 214,000 remaining in Germany in 1938) could have stopped the totalitarian onslaught of Nazi Germany when the armies of Poland, France, Belgium and numerous other countries were overwhelmed by the Third Reich," said Jonathan Greenblatt, the group's chief executive, in a statement to The Washington Post.

Young's office issued a statement Wednesday saying that the remark "has been taken entirely out of context."

"He was referencing the fact that when Hitler confiscated firearms from Jewish Germans, those communities were less able to defend themselves," the statement said. "He was not implying that an armed Jewish population would have been able to prevent the horrors of the Holocaust, but his intended message is that disarming citizens can have detrimental consequences. A defenseless people are left up to the mercy of its leaders."

It continued: "In today's society, people are desensitized to extreme violence which the Congressman is very concerned about. Our children are surrounded by images of violence in social media, films and throughout the Internet which has led to an alarming societal disconnect and isolation. Congressman Young remains committed to developing new solutions to bring our communities together and strengthen mental health services to address these issues facing our young people."

Young, first elected in 1972, has gotten himself in trouble with his comments on multiple occasions. In 2013, he drew a rebuke from House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) when he described immigrant farmworkers as "wetbacks" in a radio interview. At a 2014 meeting with high school students, he suggested — days after a classmate had committed suicide — that a lack of support from friends and family were to blame. In a community meeting shortly afterward, he blamed "largesse from the government" for driving a high suicide rate in his home state and criticized the

students for challenging him during the appearance at their high school.

On Capitol Hill, Young is tolerated — and occasionally celebrated — as a crusty relic from another era of politics.

Young is "dean of the House," an honorary title reserved for the longest-serving House member. He succeeded John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), who resigned in December after nearly 53 years in office. Upon his selection as dean in January, Young was recognized on the House floor last month by House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

"As we all know, Don Young is not someone to let anything — or anyone — get in his way," Ryan said of Young. "He can be direct, but you always know where he stands on things, or really, where you stand with him."

His brusque reputation, however, hasn't stopped colleagues from calling Young out for his Holocaust remarks.

Rep. Nita M. Lowey (D-N.Y.), who is Jewish, tweeted her demand that Young apologize, calling the comment "disgusting & reprehensible, not to mention one of the dumbest things I have ever heard."

Dick's Sporting Goods To Stop Selling Assault-style Rifles In All Stores, Citing School Shooting

By Samantha Masunaga

Los Angeles Times, February 28, 2018

Dick's Sporting Goods said Wednesday that it will no longer sell assault-style rifles or high-capacity magazines and will not sell guns to anyone under 21 after the shooting massacre at a Parkland, Fla., high school that left 17 people dead.

The Coraopolis, Pa., retailer is also taking a strong stance on gun control, saying in its statement that "thoughts and prayers are not enough" and calling for elected officials to enact a ban on assault-style weapons. It will continue to sell other firearms.

"We support and respect the Second Amendment, and we recognize and appreciate that the vast majority of gun owners in this country are responsible, law-abiding citizens," company Chief Executive Edward Stack said in the statement. "But we have to help solve the problem that's in front of us."

Dick's said it had removed assault-style rifles, also known as modern sporting rifles, from all of its Dick's stores following the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., which left 20 children and six adults dead.

But Wednesday's announcement now extends that removal to all 35 of its Field and Stream outdoor sporting goods stores, which are largely concentrated from Texas eastward.

Stack said on "Good Morning America" that Dick's is prepared for any potential backlash, but will never allow the sale of such guns in its stores again.

Dick's also said a review of its records found that it sold a shotgun in November to Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old suspect in the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Cruz has been charged with 17 counts of premeditated murder.

On Wednesday, classes at the high school resumed for the first time since the shooting.

Stack noted in the statement that the shotgun was sold to Cruz "following all of the rules and laws," and that this was not the gun, or the type of gun, that Cruz used in the shooting. "But it could have been," Stack noted.

"Clearly this indicates on so many levels that the systems in place are not effective to protect our kids and our citizens," he said. "'We believe it's time to do something about it."

Dick's Sporting Goods is a rapidly growing sporting goods retailer in a sector where other chains such as Sport Chalet and Sports Authority have stumbled. As of January 2017, Dick's operated 797 stores in 47 states, including 52 in California. The retailer has its own Dick's branded stores, as well as specialty stores, such as Golf Galaxy.

It's unclear how many assault-style weapons have been sold at Dick's stores. The retailer reports sales in categories such as footwear and apparel in filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, but has never broken out its hunting business, which includes guns and ammunition, according to Christopher Svezia, senior vice president of equity research at Wedbush Securities.

However, he estimated that hunting makes up just under 10% of the retailer's sales, with guns and ammunition making up a large part of that.

Gun and ammunition sales have been in decline throughout most of last year, largely due to the Trump administration's stance on regulation, Svezia said. Typically gun sales rise when there is a fear there may be new regulations that would curb firearm ownership, something that was seen during the Obama administration.

With that in mind, along with the fact that the Field and Stream stores make up just a small number of the overall Dick's footprint, Svezia said Dick's decision could have a "little bit of a negative impact" for the company, but it would likely be muted.

While guns that have been pulled from the racks at Dick's stores are not typically used for hunting, the company has entered an intense national conversation that most companies steer clear of to avoid offending potential customers.

In 2015, Walmart Inc. said it would stop selling semi-automatic weapons, such as the AR-15, attributing the decision to lower consumer demand.

The gun issue has embroiled a number of companies since the Parkland shooting, from Delta Air Lines to FedEx. Dick's Sporting Goods Inc. is based just outside of Pittsburgh in a state where the first day of deer hunting season is an unofficial holiday for some families.

On Saturday, Delta said it would no longer offer discounted fares to members of the National Rifle Assn. traveling to the organization's 2018 annual meeting. But the airline has faced a backlash for its decision, which came as Delta had been seeking a break on sales tax for jet fuel from the Georgia Legislature.

The state's lieutenant governor, Casey Cagle, said in a tweet Monday that he would "kill any tax legislation that benefits Delta unless the company changes its position and fully reinstates its relationship with the NRA."

In the statement, Stack called for elected officials to enact a number of regulations, including raising the minimum purchase age for guns to 21, banning high-capacity magazines and so-called bump stocks, and requiring "universal background checks that include relevant mental health information and previous interactions with the law," as well as a "complete" universal database of people who are banned from buying guns.

Among Dick's stores in Southern California are locations in Glendale, Pasadena, Torrance and El Segundo.

Dick's Sporting Goods Pulled Assault-style Rifles After Sandy Hook, Too. It Didn't Last.

By Josh Hafner And Nathan Bomey

USA Today, February 28, 2018

Dick's Sporting Goods announced it will stop selling assault-style rifles in stores nationwide after this month's school shooting in Parkland, Fla. — a move similar to one it made after the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Conn.

"We love these kids and their rallying cry, 'enough is enough,'" Dick's CEO Edward Stack said in an interview with The New York Times. "It got to us."

It got to Dick's five years ago, too, after a man used an AR-15-style to kill 20 children and six teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

The company halted sales of similar rifles at Dick's-branded stores (though sales of them later continued at its Field & Stream-branded stores, a subsidiary of 35 locations focused on outdoors products).

Would the company reverse this week's decision? "Never," Stack said Wednesday on ABC's Good Morning America.

"To think about the loss and the grief that those kids and those parents had, we said, 'We need to do something,'" Stack told ABC. "And we're taking these guns out of all of our stores permanently."

Dick's sold a shotgun to the Parkland school shooter through one of its stores last November, Stack said. Though the gun wasn't used in the shooting, the revelation spurred the company toward action, he said.

"When we looked at that, we said, 'The systems that are in place across the board just aren't effective enough to keep us from selling someone a gun like that,'" he said.

Dick's Sporting Goods CEO Says Company Will Stop Selling Assault-style Rifles, Set Under-21 Ban For Other Guns

By Rachel Siegel

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Dick's Sporting Goods will no longer sell assault-style firearms, will ban high-capacity magazines and will not sell any guns to people younger than 21, the company announced Wednesday, a significant move for the retail giant in the midst of renewed calls for national gun reform.

Chief executive Edward W. Stack made the announcement during an appearance on "Good Morning America", as well as through a company statement that said "thoughts and prayers are not enough" in the wake of America's latest mass shooting. Two weeks ago, a gunman killed 17 people, most of them teenagers, in Parkland, Fla., with an AR-15 that was legally purchased. The alleged shooter, Nikolas Cruz, bought a shotgun from a Dick's store in November, Stack said during the television interview.

Although the weapon purchased at the Dick's outlet was not the one used in the massacre, Stack said his company was moved to act.

"We did everything by the book, and we did everything that the law required, and he was still able to buy a gun," Stack told host George Stephanopoulos.

Stack's announcement carried both symbolic and retail heft as companies — including sporting goods stores and airlines — have been pressured to drop special discounts and other ties to the gun industry and the National Rifle Association. Still, it remains unclear what percentage of Dick's sales came from the weapons in question, how the company will define "assault-style rifles," and whether similar retailers will follow suit.

Dick's did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday morning.

The announcement, though heralded by some, drew scrutiny given that Dick's discontinued sales of assault-style rifles from its eponymous stores after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in 2012. A few months later, the firearms went back into circulation through Dick's outdoor and hunting chain, Field & Stream.

A company statement put out Wednesday morning said assault-style rifles would be removed from all 35 Field & Stream locations.

Joseph Holt, an expert on business ethics at University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, wrote that Dick's deserved praise for its ban and for "not waiting for government to get its act together to take decisive action." But the applause should be limited, he said.

"Dick's chief executive, Edward Stack, said he was 'disturbed and upset' when he saw what happened in Parkland," Holt said in a statement. "That's good, but it is hard to understand why they were not sufficiently disturbed and upset to take action years earlier, after the slaughter of innocents at Sandy Hook."

Dick's will continue to sell a variety of rifles, shotguns, blackpowder guns and youth guns, as well as ammunition. Its website listed 28 different kinds of rifles for sale, as well as 23 types of shotguns.

On Good Morning America, Stack urged Congress to put aside partisan politics and enact swift changes to gun laws. A statement called on those in office to ban assault-style firearms, ban high-capacity magazines and bump stocks, and require universal background checks that "include relevant mental health information and previous interactions with the law." The statement also demanded a comprehensive database of people banned from buying firearms and the closure of the private sale and gun show loophole that waives background checks.

The company drew wide-ranging support on Twitter in the hours after the announcement, with many people saying Dick's had won them over as new lifelong customers. Just before 9:30 a.m., the NRA tweeted that "bans do nothing but infringe on the rights of law-abiding citizens."

Nearly 250,000 people had shared a Dick's Facebook post on the change in sales practices, with the range of comments offering a brief lens into America's fraught divisions over gun control.

"Looks like my business will stay with local gun shops and anything else I need will be purchased at Bass Pro and Cabelas," wrote one commenter.

"Thank you for standing up for our kids," read another. "You have my business now."

Dick's sales decision would "not make everyone happy," Stack said in his televised interview. But when asked whether the company would ever reverse its position, Stack offered a staunch "never."

He praised action by Florida students, who have participated in marches and rallies demanding change.

"Our view was if the kids can be brave enough to organize like this, we can be brave enough to take these out of there," Stack said.

Dick's Sporting Goods, Major Gun Retailer, Stops Selling Assault-Style Weapons

By Julie Creswell

New York Times, February 28, 2018

One of the nation's largest sports retailers, Dick's Sporting Goods, said Wednesday morning it was immediately ending sales of all assault-style rifles in its stores.

The retailer also said that it would no longer sell high-capacity magazines and that it would not sell any gun to anyone under 21 years of age, regardless of local laws.

The announcement, made two weeks after the school shooting in Parkland, Fla., that killed 17 students and staff members, is one of the strongest stances taken by corporate America in the national gun debate. It also carries symbolic weight, coming from a prominent national gun seller.

Late last week, after coming under attack on social media for their ties to the National Rifle Association, a number of major companies, including Hertz car rental, MetLife insurance and Delta Air Lines, publicly ended those relationships, issuing brief, carefully phrased statements.

But Edward Stack, the 63-year-old chief executive of Dick's whose father founded the store in 1948, is deliberately steering his company directly into the storm, making clear that the company's new policy was a direct response to the Florida shooting.

"When we saw what happened in Parkland, we were so disturbed and upset," Mr. Stack said in an interview Tuesday evening. "We love these kids and their rallying cry, 'enough is enough.' It got to us."

He added, "We're going to take a stand and step up and tell people our view and, hopefully, bring people along into the conversation."

Mr. Stack said he hoped that conversation would include politicians. As part of its stance, Dick's is calling on elected officials to enact what it called "common sense gun reform" by passing laws to raise the minimum age to purchase guns to 21, to ban assault-type weapons and so-called bump stocks, and to conduct broader universal background checks that include mental-health information and previous interactions with law enforcement.

This is not the first time Dick's has made changes in response to a school massacre. In 2012, after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School that killed 26 people, Dick's removed assault-style rifles from its main retail stores. But a few months later, the company began carrying the firearms at its outdoor and hunting retail chain, Field & Stream.

This time, Mr. Stack said, the changes will be permanent.

Mr. Stack said the retailer began scouring its purchase records shortly after the identity of the suspected Parkland shooter, Nikolas Cruz, became known. The company soon discovered it had legally sold a gun to Mr. Cruz in November, though it was not the gun or type of gun used in the school shooting.

"But it came to us that we could have been a part of this story," he said. "We said, 'We don't want to be a part of this any longer,'" said Mr. Stack.

That decision raised rounds of discussions with top executives inside the company as well as the directors, all of whom backed the decision to take a stance, said Mr. Stack.

As of Wednesday morning, the company said all AR-15s and other semiautomatic rifles would be removed from its stores and websites.

Mr. Stack said Dick's remained a staunch supporter of the Second Amendment and will continue to sell a variety of sport and hunting firearms. Although he has never been a member of the N.R.A., Mr. Stack said he is, in fact, a gun owner and enjoys trapshooting clay targets.

But when it comes to selling guns to individuals under 21 years of age or stocking assault-style rifles, Mr. Stack said his company was done. "We don't want to be a part of a mass shooting," he said.

Dick's informed its employees of the new policy in an internal note Wednesday morning, shortly after Mr. Stack appeared on "Good Morning America" to discuss the decision.

Dick's is not the first retailer to stop selling the semiautomatic guns. In 2015, Walmart said that it would no longer sell high-powered rifles in its stores in the United States. But Walmart sidestepped any controversy involving gun politics, attributing its decision to lower customer demand for the military-style rifles.

It is unclear what financial impact the decision will have on Dick's business. Neither Dick's nor its competitor, Cabela's, now owned by Bass Pro Shops, have broken out firearm sales in their financial reports. But last August, Dick's shares plummeted after it said weak results from its hunting segment resulted in its missing Wall Street's second-quarter earnings estimates.

Over all, firearm sales for retailers and gun manufacturers have slumped since Donald J. Trump was elected president, as fears of stricter gun regulation receded. Firearm sales data for the United States is not readily available, but background checks tumbled more than 8 percent last year, the largest fall since the F.B.I. began keeping track in 1998.

Mr. Stack said he and his company expected there would be mixed response — including fallout — to its new policy.

"The whole hunting business is an important part of our business, and we know there is going to be backlash on this," said Mr. Stack. "But we're willing to accept that."

He added, "If the kids in Parkland are being brave enough to stand up and do this, we can be brave enough to stand up with them."

Dick's Sporting Goods Stops Selling Assault-Style Weapons, Raises Age For Gun Buyers

[Wall Street Journal](#), February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

CEOs Choose Sides On Gun Control At Their Own Risk

CEOs feel pressure from younger, digitally savvy consumers and from employees to take a stand on issues, but corporate reputation can suffer

By Vanessa Fuhrmans And Rachel Feintzeig

[Wall Street Journal](#), February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

On Guns, Companies Step In Where Congress Fears To Tread

[USA Today](#), February 28, 2018

As students who survived semiautomatic slaughter at a Florida high school on Valentine's Day returned to class this week, their piercing demands for commonsense firearm restrictions remained unmet by lawmakers in Washington.

In the face of uncertainty on Capitol Hill, another option for these strong-willed students is to pressure corporations to step in where Congress fears to tread.

The students notched one victory on this front Wednesday when a major retailer, Dick's Sporting Goods, said it would stop selling assault-style rifles altogether, and block sales of high-capacity magazines and other guns to anyone under 21. "We love these kids and their rallying cry, 'enough is enough.' It got to us," Dick's CEO Edward Stack said in announcing the policy changes.

The action by Dick's follows decisions by a host of companies — including United Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Best Western and MetLife — to sever discount deals with the National Rifle Association, even in the face of thuggish threats by NRA supporters.

More broadly, financial institutions have an opportunity to drastically slash sales of these assault-style weapons, which were used to kill 17 students and teachers in Parkland, Fla., this month and, before that, to end 26 lives in a Texas church in November, 58 lives at a Las Vegas concert in October, and 26 at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut in 2012.

Emergency doctors who treated the victims at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School spoke of how these weapons of war have a unique capacity to shred internal organs with their high-velocity rounds. If credit card companies, processors and issuers threatened to cut off retailers who insist on selling this one category of gun, sales

would undoubtedly plummet. Few gun retailers would want to become all-cash businesses.

Within the banking industry, Bank of America has already begun querying, in the context of responsible behavior, clients who manufacture assault-style weapons. And in 2016, Visa advanced a lengthy written commitment to corporate responsibility, outlining what it expects from clients in the area of ethical practices and human rights.

New York Times columnist Andrew Ross Sorkin — who first floated the concept of leveraging the credit industry to curtail the sale of assault-style rifles, high-capacity magazines and "bump stocks" used to render rifles into machine guns — said his interviews with CEOs reveal that many are amenable to these good works, if worried about NRA-led boycotts or even threats to employees.

The Douglas High School survivors have already set the standard for true courage in facing up to the gun lobby with their demand to halt sales of this one category of guns. And the public is fully on their side, favoring — by more than 2-to-1 — a ban on assault-style weapons.

If politicians don't have the backbone to do the right thing, corporate America just might.

The NRA Is Finally Paying The Price

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

A NUMBER of companies that once saw value in partnering with the National Rifle Association have decided to end their connections with the organization. Outrage over the deaths of 17 people, most of them teenagers, in the South Florida school shooting and the passionate advocacy of students who survived the massacre are helping to drive the unprecedented corporate backlash. Most of the credit, though, goes to the NRA for its unhinged response to the shooting, and its unyielding opposition to any kind of gun control.

In the aftermath of the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, a consumer campaign began urging boycott of companies that did business with the NRA. The First National Bank of Omaha was the first major business to announce that it would cut ties as a result of customer feedback, saying it was not renewing its contract to issue the NRA Visa card. Others followed, including airlines, hotels and rental car firms that had offered discounts to NRA members.

The NRA has become accustomed to public pressure, but as University of California at Los Angeles professor Adam Winkler told Vox, this is the first time it has been hit with such a broad boycott. We hope it marks the beginning of a consensus among responsible businesses that affiliation with militant opponents of gun control is not good for the bottom line.

It's no mere coincidence that many of the firms cutting their NRA ties announced their decisions after NRA leader

Wayne LaPierre's chilling address last week at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference. It was not so much a discussion of public policy about guns as a paranoid call to arms against a fantasized socialist takeover of the United States, with dog whistles for Christian white supremacy thrown in. Punctuating that rant was the ugly suggestion by the group's spokeswoman, Dana Loesch, that the media welcomes mass shootings because of some supposed bump in ratings. "Crying white mothers are ratings gold" was her exact phrase. Little wonder that businesses might want to keep their distance from such toxic rhetoric.

Opinion is mixed about how effective the boycott will be. Decisions by businesses and sports organizations not to operate in places that adopted laws discriminating against LGBT people clearly made a difference in Indiana and North Carolina. But public attention can be short-lived, and there can be blowback, as Delta Air Lines discovered when Georgia lawmakers threatened to withhold a promised tax break. Moreover, controversy has never been avoided by the NRA but instead welcomed as a motivator and a recruitment tool. "Some corporations have decided to punish NRA membership in a shameful display of political and civic cowardice," the group said in a effort to paint as unpatriotic anyone who dares to disagree with its absolutist views.

What the NRA ignores is that the Constitution it so often lauds gives citizens the right to decide with whom to do business. The NRA's alienation of a large mass of consumers is its own responsibility.

Walmart To Raise Age For Buying Firearms And Ammunition To 21

By Rebecca Morin

Politico, February 28, 2018

Walmart, one of the nation's leading retailers, announced on Wednesday that it would no longer sell guns and ammunition to those younger than 21.

"In light of recent events, we've taken an opportunity to review our policy on firearm sales," according to a company statement. "Going forward, we are raising the age restriction for purchase of firearms and ammunition to 21 years of age. We will update our processes as quickly as possible to implement this change."

The announcement came the same day that Dick's Sporting Goods also announced it would no longer sell guns to anyone under the age of 21.

Unlike Dick's, however, Walmart has not sold AR-15 or other assault-style rifles since 2015, and it does not sell handguns, except in Alaska. The company also said it does not sell so-called bump stocks, high-capacity magazines or similar accessories.

The decision comes as the debate around guns and assault rifles has intensified after an assailant opened fire

with an assault-style rifle two weeks ago at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killing 17 and wounding more than a dozen.

"We take seriously our obligation to be a responsible seller of firearms and go beyond federal law by requiring customers to pass a background check before purchasing any firearm," Walmart said in its statement.

The company noted that unlike federal law, which would allow the sale of a firearm if no response to a background check request had been received within three business days, the company prohibited the sale until the request was approved.

In addition, Walmart announced that it would be removing from its website items that resemble assault-style rifles, including Airsoft guns and toys.

Walmart Says It Will No Longer Sell Firearms And Ammunition To People Younger Than 21

Associated Press, February 28, 2018

Walmart announced Wednesday that it will no longer sell firearms and ammunition to people younger than 21 and would also remove items resembling assault-style rifles from its website.

The move comes after Dick's Sporting Goods announced earlier in the day that it would restrict the sale of firearms to those under 21 years old. It didn't mention ammunition. Dick's also said it would immediately stop selling assault-style rifles, and its CEO took on the National Rifle Ass. by demanding tougher gun laws.

Walmart said its decision came after the company reviewed its firearm sales policy in light of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., that killed 17 people. The teenage gunman used an AR-15 rifle. It said it takes "seriously our obligation to be a responsible seller of firearms" and also emphasized its background of "serving sportsmen and hunters."

Several major corporations, including MetLife, Hertz and Delta Air Lines, have cut ties with the NRA since the Florida tragedy, but none were retailers that sold guns. The NRA has pushed back aggressively against calls for raising age limits for guns or restricting the sale of assault-style weapons.

Walmart Inc. stopped selling AR-15 guns and other semi-automatic weapons in 2015. It doesn't sell bump stocks, the accessory attached to a semi-automatic gun that makes it easier to fire rounds faster. It also doesn't sell large-capacity magazines. It also says it doesn't sell handguns, except in Alaska.

In announcing the change in policy, the company said it had processes in place to make sure it was applied for online sales.

Times reporter Samantha Masunaga contributed to this report.

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Deal Will Sign Tax Bill Without Delta Break After NRA Flap

By Greg Bluestein

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, February 28, 2018

Gov. Nathan Deal said he would reluctantly support a measure that stripped a lucrative tax break for Delta Air Lines but also includes broader cuts to the state's income tax rate.

The Republican was a vocal supporter of the tax break, which would have slashed the \$50 million jet fuel tax exemption. But Senate Republicans voted Wednesday to strip it out of the measure after Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle said he would "kill" the incentive unless Delta restored ties with a gun rights group.

At a press conference Wednesday, Deal said he was frustrated by the "antics" of Republicans seeking higher office and said he would still seek to salvage a tax break for Delta. But he said he couldn't veto a measure that also amounted to a sweeping tax cut for citizens.

"The real story is the unprecedented \$5 billion tax cuts for Georgians," he said. "The real story is what it has always been: What is in the best interests of our state."

A Defiant Sessions Vows To 'Continue My Duties' After Trump Trashes 'Disgraceful' FISA Probe

By S.A. Miller

Washington Times, February 28, 2018

Attorney General Jeff Sessions bucked criticism Wednesday from President Trump and declared he wasn't quitting yet.

"We have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure complaints against this Department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary," Mr. Sessions said in a statement.

"As long as I am the Attorney General, I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor, and this Department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

Earlier, Mr. Trump slammed the attorney general as "disgraceful" for relying on the Justice Department Inspector General to investigate allegations of FBI abuses of the FISA court in obtaining warrants to spy on a Trump campaign official.

"Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with

reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!" Mr. Trump tweeted.

Mr. Sessions has repeatedly come under fire from the president, who first harangued his attorney general for recusing himself from the Justice Department's Russia probe.

The recusal helped clear the way for the appointment of special counsel Robert S. Muller to investigate alleged collusion by Trump campaign officials.

Mr. Sessions reportedly offered his resignation to the president on at least two previous occasions but Mr. Trump refused to accept.

Trump Blasts Jeff Sessions Over Surveillance Probe, And Sessions Fights Back

By David Jackson

USA Today, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump and his attorney general, Jeff Sessions, clashed again Wednesday, this time over a newly announced investigation into alleged abuse of surveillance powers — a probe Trump himself endorsed for months.

During a morning set of unusual tweets, Trump protested Sessions' decision to have the Justice Department's inspector general investigate the handling of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act warrants, rather than the department's prosecutors.

The president argued an IG probe will take too long, and added, "Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL."

Hours later, Sessions fired back with a statement saying that "we have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure complaints against this Department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary.

"As long as I am the Attorney General," Sessions said, "I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor, and this department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

Trump has often criticized Sessions on a variety of fronts, including the attorney general's decision to recuse himself from the Russia investigation, a decision that led to the appointment of Special Counsel Robert Mueller.

Yet not since July has Trump launched such pointed broadsides against his attorney general, who was one of Trump's earliest and most vocal supporters.

Last summer, Sessions described Trump's public rebukes "kind of hurtful," but expressed his intent to remain on the job.

"He [Trump] has had a lot of criticism and he's steadfast determined to get his job done," Sessions said in a July interview with Fox News. "And he wants all of us to do our jobs, and that's what I intend to do."

The attorney general acknowledged Tuesday that he had asked the Justice Department's inspector general to review any possible surveillance abuses raised by House Republicans as part of a probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election. Republicans allege that the FBI misused a secret surveillance court to get approval to wiretap former campaign adviser Carter Page.

Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., told Fox News he understands where Trump is coming from about the organization of the investigation, but he doesn't think the president should be criticizing his attorney general in public.

"Jeff Sessions is loyal to the President and he's one of the first to support him, and he's often in very difficult positions and I think he's trying to reconcile as best as he can," King said.

In another unusual tweet, Trump suggested he would punish California by not building sections of his anti-migration border wall in that state — even though California officials have long objected to the proposed wall in the first place.

Trump tweeted that "sections of the Wall that California wants built NOW will not be built until the whole Wall is approved."

The tweet came a day after a federal judge ruled that the Trump administration had the right to waive environmental laws in order to build the wall. The ruling came in a lawsuit with plaintiffs that include California's attorney general.

The prospects for a wall anywhere remain uncertain; Congress has yet to fund it and Mexico has repeatedly refused Trump's demands that it help finance the structure.

Trump Flays Sessions For 'Disgraceful' Decision, Sparking New Clash

By Jonathan Landay, Sarah N. Lynch

Reuters, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Trump Lashes Out At Sessions Over Alleged Surveillance Abuses

By Matt Zapotosky And Karoun Demirjian

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

President Trump on Wednesday lashed out again at his attorney general, questioning why the man he picked as the country's top law enforcement official was relying on the Justice Department's inspector general to review alleged surveillance abuses.

In a Twitter message that took some liberties with the facts, Trump wrote, "Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and

already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Trump was referring to Attorney General Jeff Sessions's assertion the day before that Justice Department Inspector General Michael E. Horowitz would look into alleged surveillance abuses that legislators on the House Intelligence Committee have been debating in recent weeks. The announcement was discussed at some length on one of Trump's favorite television shows, "Fox & Friends," earlier in the morning — with one of the hosts saying Horowitz might need to "bulk up his staff" and another asking whether they should be concerned because Horowitz is a part of the Justice Department.

"This guy, he works for the DOJ? And he's going to be investigating the DOJ?" host Ainsley Earhardt asked. "Should we be worried about that?"

"He apparently is a man of integrity," host Steve Doocy replied.

An spokesman for the inspector general confirmed that the attorney general had asked the office to review such issues but declined further comment.

Sessions said in a statement: "We have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure complaints against this Department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary. As long as I am the Attorney General, I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor, and this Department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

Trump has repeatedly lambasted the federal law enforcement apparatus, and Sessions — whose decision to recuse himself from the investigation into whether the Trump campaign coordinated with the Kremlin to influence the 2016 election has long irked the president — has drawn particular ire. Trump has called Sessions "beleaguered" and toyed with the idea of firing him. Sessions has shown no signs publicly of fighting back against his boss and has dutifully worked to implement the president's policy agenda.

Legal analysts say the president seems to be subverting the long-held principle that the Justice Department should be independent — especially when it comes to criminal investigations. His goal, they say, seems to be to undercut an investigation that could touch him.

"In past administrations, both Democratic and Republican, presidents rightly recognized and accepted that White House interference in potential DOJ investigations is wholly unacceptable," said Matt Axelrod, a senior official in President Barack Obama's Justice Department who now works at the firm Linklaters. "When this president attacks his own attorney general and urges that attorney general to carry out a political vendetta on his behalf, he subverts both the rule of law and the sacrosanct principle of independent and apolitical law enforcement."

The most recent dust-up stems from the FBI's post-campaign monitoring of former Trump campaign adviser Carter Page.

Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee, especially its chairman, Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.), have alleged that the FBI and Justice Department misled the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court to obtain a warrant to monitor Page, while Democrats have countered that their GOP colleagues are misstating the facts.

The two sides in recent weeks issued dueling memos on the topic.

The first, from Republicans, said the FBI used information that was ultimately funded by Hillary Clinton's campaign and the Democratic National Committee to obtain the warrant on Page. That finding and others, it said, amounted to "a troubling breakdown of legal processes established to protect the American people from abuses related to the FISA process," a reference to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

The FBI disputed the accuracy of the Republicans' statements, and Democrats fired back Saturday with their own memo saying the bureau had been unfairly maligned.

Page has acknowledged that an FBI wiretap detected suspected Russian spies discussing their attempts to recruit him in 2013, and he told congressional investigators that he was interviewed by the FBI and cooperated as they investigated the men, who were ultimately charged with acting as unregistered foreign agents. By the Democrats' telling, the bureau told the court specific details of where its new information on Page came from.

The FBI revealed, for example, that a source whose information the bureau was relying on in part to obtain the warrant had first been approached by a "U.S. person" who had been hired "to conduct research regarding Candidate #1's ties to Russia." The source was Christopher Steele, a British former intelligence officer who produced a dossier of damaging allegations against Trump.

"The FBI speculates that the U.S. person was likely looking for information that could be used to discredit candidate #1's campaign," the application says. "Candidate #1" is a reference to Trump.

After the Democrats released their memo, Trump wrote on Twitter, "Just confirms all of the terrible things that were done. SO ILLEGAL!" When Sessions revealed Tuesday that he had asked the inspector general to look into the matter, the White House seemed pleased at first.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said at a briefing that while she had not spoken with the president about the matter, "it's something that he's clearly had frustration over, so I would imagine he certainly supports the decision to look into what we feel to be some wrongdoing."

"I think that's the role of the Department of Justice," Sanders said, "and we're glad that they're fulfilling that job."

Nunes said Tuesday, though, that he was not aware of any plans to launch an investigation based on his findings, and he said he doubted that Horowitz would launch such a probe.

Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.), the House Intelligence Committee's top Democrat, was chagrined by Sessions's call for a probe by the inspector general. "If that's accurate, it represents another weakening of the independence of the Justice Department, and it would mark another sad turn for our system of checks and balances," he said.

Sessions has previously proved responsive to GOP requests. Late last year, after inquiries on a host of Republican concerns largely centered around Clinton, Sessions directed senior federal prosecutors to look into the matters and report back to him. He indicated he was at least entertaining the idea of a second special counsel for those inquiries, and on Wednesday, a group of 13 Republican legislators asked that such an investigator be appointed to probe alleged surveillance abuses in Page's case.

Even before the president's tweet, as congressional leaders raised questions about surveillance abuses, Sessions said he would forward to "appropriate DOJ components" the information he was receiving from legislators.

Horowitz's office and its lawyers are a part of the Justice Department, though they serve as a sort of ombudsman to police internal wrongdoing. Special agents in his investigations division develop cases for possible criminal prosecution, although on noncriminal matters his office mainly issues reports. He was confirmed as the inspector general in 2012, during the Obama administration, though he was nominated earlier to the U.S. Sentencing Commission by President George W. Bush.

"I have had a number of interactions with Inspector General Horowitz, including as recently as earlier this month," Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.), chair of the House Oversight Committee, said in a statement. "He has been fair, fact centric, and appropriately confidential with his work. He was confirmed by the U.S. Senate without a single dissent. I have complete confidence in him and hope he is given the time, the resources and the independence to complete his work."

Horowitz's office has garnered a high profile lately as it has investigated the FBI's handling of the probe into Clinton's use of a private email server while she was secretary of state. Among the matters Horowitz is looking at are then-FBI Director James B. Comey's July 2016 announcement that he was recommending the case be closed with no charges and Comey's decision in October 2016 — on the eve of the election — to reveal that the bureau had resumed its work.

That investigation, which was opened in January 2017, led Horowitz to a discovery that also has been of interest to Trump and Republican congressional leaders — texts

between two senior FBI officials who had been assigned to the Clinton and Russia cases and who seemed to dislike the president.

Julie Tate contributed to this report.

Trump: 'Disgraceful' For Sessions To Tap DOJ Watchdog To Investigate FBI

Appearing to defend himself, Sessions says he would do his job with 'integrity and honor.'

By Cristiano Lima And Josh Gerstein

Politico, February 28, 2018

Jeff Sessions said Wednesday he would do his job with "integrity and honor," apparently defending himself after President Donald Trump called it "disgraceful" that the attorney general had asked an internal watchdog to investigate Republicans' claims of inappropriate behavior by FBI agents.

"We have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure complaints against this Department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary," Sessions said in a statement that did not mention Trump by name.

"As long as I am the Attorney General, I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor, and this Department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution," he said.

ORIGINAL STORY:

President Donald Trump on Wednesday slammed as "disgraceful" Attorney General Jeff Sessions' decision to have an internal watchdog investigate Republicans' claims that FBI agents acted inappropriately in conducting surveillance of a former Trump campaign official.

"Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc," the president tweeted. "Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

The remarks served as the president's latest public critique of his attorney general, who Trump has repeatedly taken to task in public over his handling of the ongoing federal probe into Russian election interference.

At issue now is surveillance starting in late 2016 of Carter Page, who at the time had left a role advising the Trump campaign and had drawn scrutiny for his ties to Russia. House Republicans, with the White House's backing, released a hotly contested memo alleging federal officials misled a judge to obtain a warrant for the surveillance. Trump has since cited the memo to criticize top intelligence officials for their involvement in the probe into Russian election meddling.

On Saturday, the House panel released a Democratic counterpart to the GOP memo, which serves as a rebuttal to

allegations of wrongdoing by intelligence officials. It says the FBI did not mislead the judge and that the FBI was investigating possible ties between Trump's team and Russia for weeks before it received a controversial dossier of information from a former British spy. Trump has dismissed the Democratic memo as a "nothing."

Sessions said Tuesday that Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz, the DOJ's internal watchdog, would investigate Republicans' claims of wrongdoing.

"We believe the Department of Justice must adhere to the high standards in the FISA court and, yes, it will be investigated," Sessions said Tuesday. "The inspector general will take that as one of the matters they'll deal with."

Despite Trump's suggestion that Horowitz is an "Obama guy," Horowitz has been appointed to roles by presidents of both parties. He held Justice Department positions under four presidents: George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama, who appointed him inspector general in 2012.

The younger Bush tapped Horowitz to serve a six-year term on the U.S. Sentencing Commission. As inspector general, Horowitz produced reports that at times shined an unflattering light on senior figures in the Obama administration. He also recently recovered thousands of text messages between two senior FBI officials who Republicans have accused of political bias in the investigation of the Trump campaign's contacts with Russians.

Spokespeople for Sessions and Horowitz did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Trump's tweet.

Earlier this month, Sessions praised Horowitz and his efforts to dig into alleged misconduct.

"He's been relentless and tough," the attorney general said in a recent interview on Fox News. "Much of what we know about this has been produced by his work and the Department of Justice."

One prominent GOP lawmaker rebuffed Trump's criticism Wednesday.

"I have had a number of interactions with Inspector General Horowitz, including as recently as earlier this month," said House Oversight Committee Chairman Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.) "He has been fair, fact-centric, and appropriately confidential with his work."

It's unclear what Trump meant by Horowitz's team being "late" with a report on alleged political bias in the investigation into Hillary Clinton's email server and related decisions made before the 2016 election. Horowitz said in November that it would likely be completed by March or April, a timeframe consistent with what officials suggested for much of last year.

There's no indication of what stage Horowitz is at with his review of the surveillance issues. It seems unlikely those

matters could be thoroughly investigated by his office in time to be part of the upcoming report.

The president has publicly criticized a series of Sessions' decisions in office, with his handling of probes into Russian election interference efforts and Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while she was secretary of state serving as central sticking points for the president.

Last Wednesday, the president questioned why Obama's administration was not under investigation, given that Moscow's attempts to meddle in U.S. elections began before Trump took office.

"Question: If all of the Russian meddling took place during the Obama Administration, right up to January 20th, why aren't they the subject of the investigation?" Trump tweeted. "Why didn't Obama do something about the meddling? Why aren't Dem crimes under investigation? Ask Jeff Sessions!"

Sessions recused himself from the Russia probe last year because of his role in Trump's 2016 campaign, a move that prompted a sharp rebuke from the president at the time.

In July, Trump told the New York Times' Sessions' recusal was "very unfair to the president" and said he would have never tapped him to lead the Justice Department if he had known he would step aside from handling the probe. After chiding the attorney general over the decision, Trump played coy on whether he would keep Sessions in his post, saying that "time will tell" about his future in the administration.

Trump also accused Sessions last year of having "has taken a VERY weak position on Hillary Clinton crimes."

Kyle Cheney contributed to this report.

AP FACT CHECK: Trump's Distorted Complaint About Sessions

By Eric Tucker

Associated Press, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's latest broadside against his attorney general distorted operations of the Justice Department's watchdog office in multiple ways.

The president's tweet Wednesday: "Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 28, 2018

The report he suggests is late is actually not. The office he attacks as toothless has more power than he credits it with. And the inspector general he dismisses as an "Obama guy" is an independent civil servant who was appointed to federal positions both by the Bush and Obama administrations.

A look:

'POTENTIALLY MASSIVE FISA ABUSE'?

It is true that Sessions has asked the Justice Department's inspector general to investigate whether potential abuses of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act occurred when prosecutors and agents in 2016 applied for and received a secret warrant to monitor the communications of Trump campaign associate Carter Page.

That office would be the natural place within the Justice Department to do the type of review that Sessions has requested.

"We have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure complaints against this Department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary," he said in a statement Wednesday, hours after Trump's tweet. "As long as I am the Attorney General, I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor, and this Department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

The watchdog office has acknowledged receiving Sessions' request but hasn't said it's investigating.

Whether "potentially massive FISA abuse" exists is an unresolved question addressed in dueling, and partisan, congressional memos, though the FBI has defended its actions and the application process has multiple levels of approval built into it to minimize the chances of egregious problems such as what Trump is suggesting.

A Republican memo from House Intelligence Committee Chairman Rep. Devin Nunes contends the Justice Department misled the surveillance court by not disclosing that research from a former British spy relied upon for the warrant application was paid for in part by Hillary Clinton's campaign and the Democratic National Committee.

Democrats countered with their own memo saying the Justice Department did indeed inform the court about the "assessed political motivation of those who hired" the ex-spy, Christopher Steele, and that some of his information had been corroborated by the FBI. They also note that the warrant application and requests to renew it were approved by judges appointed by Republican presidents.

'NO PROSECUTORIAL POWER'?

Sure, lawyers in the inspector general's office can't bring criminal charges on their own, but they can — and often do — refer matters they investigate for potential prosecution.

Trump correctly notes that the office is investigating former FBI Director James Comey's handling of the Clinton

email investigation, as well as the broader actions of the bureau and its leaders during that probe.

But he's wrong to say the report is late. Inspector General Michael Horowitz said months ago that he expected it to be released about March or April. That timeline has not changed.

It's also not clear what Trump means when he proposes using "Justice Department lawyers" for the investigation. The watchdog office's lawyers, though independent, do indeed work at and for the Justice Department.

'AN OBAMA GUY'?

Horowitz was appointed to the inspector general job by President Barack Obama — that much is true.

But he was appointed years earlier in the Bush administration to a seat on the Sentencing Commission, suggesting he has more bipartisan bona fides than Trump acknowledges.

Though appointed by Obama, Horowitz also issued harshly critical reports of the Justice Department and its component law enforcement agencies when the department was under the Democratic leadership of Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch. Horowitz led the office when it issued a stinging 2012 report on the botched gun operation known as Fast and Furious.

He also launched the review of the FBI's handling of the Clinton case — the stated reason by Trump and Sessions for the dismissal of Comey in May.

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Trump Attacks Sessions As 'Disgraceful' — And The Attorney General Pushes Back

By Joseph Tanfani

Los Angeles Times, February 28, 2018

President Trump has added "disgraceful" to the list of insults he's thrown at his own attorney general. But this time, Jeff Sessions, the nation's top lawman, is pushing back.

Trump, who has shredded long-standing norms by repeatedly attacking his own FBI and Justice Department, on Wednesday tweeted his unhappiness that Sessions had referred charges raised in a memo by House Intelligence Committee Republicans to the Justice Department's inspector general.

"Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc." the president complained, referring to an ongoing review of former FBI Director James Comey's actions during the 2016 election.

A simple wooden casket bearing the body of evangelist Billy Graham was borne by a military unit on Wednesday into

the U.S. Capitol and onto a black-draped catafalque in the rotunda, where the confidant of presidents and world leaders was to lie in honor until evening.

President Trump led scores of dignitaries — senators, members of Congress and diplomats — as well as longtime Graham friends in acclaiming the religious leader, who died at age 99 a week ago.

"He took his message to the poorest places, to the downtrodden and to the brokenhearted, to inmates in prison, and to the overlooked and the neglected," Trump said, standing near the casket during a brief ceremony.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's mark on history will soon become part of the Smithsonian, with a donation of three items related to her swearing-in as the first woman to serve as speaker of the House.

Pelosi will donate a lacquered maple gavel, the burgundy pantsuit she wore and a copy of the speech she gave on the morning of Jan. 4, 2007, to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. She gave up the job four years later after Republicans won a majority and took control of the House.

Democrats are itching to regain the 24 seats they need to retake the House and potentially put the San Francisco Democrat back in the speaker's chair during her 17th term in the House.

President Trump hailed his administration's "big victory" in court in a case that challenged his proposed border wall, but threatened Wednesday to delay improving some sections of the existing border barrier in California.

His tweet, an apparent attempt to punish California, seemed to be an effort to fuel the continuing battle between the state's liberal, pro-immigration officials and Trump's White House.

Trump's administration won an order Tuesday from a federal judge in San Diego, who ruled that the administration did not abuse its authority in waiving some environmental laws and other regulations when it began building new barriers and demonstration projects in Southern California.

White House Communications Director Hope Hicks declined Tuesday to answer questions from the House Intelligence Committee about her work since President Trump was inaugurated.

That means Hicks wouldn't talk about the drafting of a controversial statement about a meeting at Trump Tower between Donald Trump Jr., the president's oldest son, and a Russian lawyer offering political dirt on Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign.

The statement, issued last July when news of the June 2016 meeting came to light, falsely said the meeting was about adoption policies.

Adm. Mike Rogers, who leads the U.S. Cyber Command, said Tuesday that the United States hasn't done enough to deter Russian meddling in national politics, even

as he acknowledged that President Trump hasn't directed cybersecurity officials to take more aggressive offensive actions against Moscow.

"I believe that President Putin has clearly come to the conclusion that, there's little price to pay here and therefore I can continue this activity," Rogers told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

His testimony was a reminder of the gap between the president, who has downplayed Russian interference, and his national security advisors, who have described it as an ongoing threat.

Saying the U.S. economy has strengthened in recent weeks, new Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome H. Powell suggested Tuesday that the central bank could hike its key interest rate faster than anticipated.

Powell said he and his Fed colleagues will try to balance stronger growth with the potential for "an overheated economy" now that "fiscal policy is becoming more stimulative" with tax cuts and increased federal spending.

Republican Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee has decided not to run for reelection, ending a period of seriously considering getting back in a marquee midterm contest.

Corker's chief of staff Todd Womack confirmed his decision Tuesday, which was first reported by Politico.

The senator, an outspoken Trump critic, said last year that he would not run for another term. But in recent weeks, he had given it another look.

President Trump is naming former digital advisor Brad Parscale as campaign manager of his 2020 reelection campaign.

A person familiar with the announcement confirms Parscale's selection on the condition of anonymity because the person was unauthorized to publicly discuss the news. The conservative Drudge Report website first reported his selection.

Trump has left little doubt about his intentions to seek reelection. He filed the paperwork to organize his reelection committee on the same day as his inauguration, held his first 2020 campaign rally on Feb. 18 in Florida, and has mused publicly about would-be Democratic challengers.

Trump Calls Sessions's Handling Of FISA Abuse Allegations 'Disgraceful'

By Eileen Sullivan

New York Times, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump criticized his own attorney general, Jeff Sessions, on Wednesday and called him "DISGRACEFUL" after Mr. Sessions indicated that the Justice Department's watchdog would look into accusations of potential abuse of surveillance laws rather than the agency's own lawyers.

In a 43-word tweet, Mr. Trump scolded the attorney general, belittled the role of the Justice Department's independent watchdog and pressured the agency to speed up its investigations.

Mr. Sessions, who rarely reacts publicly to the president's insults, defended the Justice Department in a statement hours later.

"We have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure complaints against this department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary," Mr. Sessions said. "As long as I am the attorney general, I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor, and this department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

The president's tweet was the latest example of Mr. Trump publicly excoriating Mr. Sessions and wading into Justice Department investigations. Though previous presidents have allowed law enforcement a large degree of independence to keep from influencing their inquiries, Mr. Trump has consistently called for investigations into his political rivals and he has criticized Mr. Sessions for not being more aggressive.

It was not immediately clear what prompted the president's outrage over Mr. Sessions, who last year recused himself from the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible coordination with Trump associates.

The attorney general, one of Mr. Trump's earliest supporters in his election campaign, has been a regular target of the president, who has criticized Mr. Sessions for his recusal — the first in a series of steps that led to the appointment of an independent special counsel to handle the ongoing Russia investigation. At one point, Mr. Sessions was prepared to resign.

Republicans have accused Justice Department and F.B.I. officials of abusing their powers by surveilling a former Trump campaign aide, Carter Page, during the course of an investigation into Russian meddling. As part of that investigation, law enforcement officials were granted permission to spy on Mr. Page from the secretive court that issues warrants under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

Mr. Sessions suggested on Tuesday that the department's inspector general will look into the Republican concerns but stopped short of saying that a fresh inquiry was underway.

"We believe the Department of Justice must adhere to the high standards in the FISA court," Mr. Sessions said in response to a reporter's question on Tuesday about the allegations made by Republicans. "I think that's just the appropriate thing; the inspector general will take that as one of the matters he'll deal with."

Shortly after the president's tweet, Mr. Trump and Mr. Sessions stood just a few yards from each other at the memorial service for the Rev. Billy Graham, who died last week. The Justice Department declined to comment on Wednesday.

The Republican accusations that Mr. Sessions spoke of on Tuesday were laid out in a memo by House Intelligence Committee staffers that was rebutted by the panel's Democrats.

Mr. Sessions first addressed the Justice Department's response to the Republican memo on Feb. 2, when the document was released.

"Congress has made inquiries concerning an issue of great importance for the country and concerns have been raised about the Department's performance. I have great confidence in the men and women of this Department. But no Department is perfect," Mr. Sessions said in the statement. "Accordingly, I will forward to appropriate D.O.J. components all information I receive from Congress regarding this. I am determined that we will fully and fairly ascertain the truth."

In his tweet on Wednesday, Mr. Trump also slammed the department's inspector general, Michael E. Horowitz, for taking so long to conclude his investigation into the former F.B.I. director's handling of the bureau's inquiry of Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while she was secretary of state. That inspector general investigation is expected to conclude this year with some harsh findings about senior Justice Department and F.B.I. officials in the Obama administration.

In his tweet, Mr. Trump appeared to question Mr. Horowitz's objectivity because he was appointed by former President Barack Obama.

"Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy?" Mr. Trump said.

Representative Trey Gowdy, a Republican from South Carolina and chairman of the House Oversight Committee, defended Mr. Horowitz on Wednesday and said he has been "fair, fact centric, and appropriately confidential with his work."

"I have complete confidence in him and hope he is given the time, the resources and the independence to complete his work," Mr. Gowdy said.

Senator Chuck Grassley, a Republican from Iowa and chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, also expressed his support for Mr. Horowitz. Mr. Grassley said the Senate swiftly approved Mr. Horowitz's appointment, a sign of support from both Republicans and Democrats.

In Public Spat, Trump Taunts Sessions, AG Doesn't Keep Quiet

By Sadie Gurman

Associated Press, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — Harshly criticized yet again by his boss, Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Wednesday

abandoned his usual stony silence and pushed back against President Donald Trump for saying Sessions' response to Republican complaints about the FBI was "disgraceful."

Sessions gave no suggestion he would step down in light of the charge made on Twitter and insisted he would "continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor."

Trump's latest tirade stems from a comment Sessions made Tuesday, when he suggested the Justice Department's inspector general will evaluate whether prosecutors and FBI agents wrongly obtained a warrant under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to monitor the communications of a onetime Trump campaign associate. Sessions had asked the watchdog office to review the complaints in response to pressure from congressional Republicans, who, like Trump, have fumed about what they believe to be bias within the FBI.

Trump tweeted: "Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Sessions answered hours later, saying his department had taken the appropriate step and "will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution."

It was hardly the first time the president has aired his gripes against Session over the Russia probe. The former Alabama senator, an early supporter of Trump's candidacy, has endured a year's worth of Trump's wrath in order to hold onto the job he had long desired. But even for Trump, who once called the attorney general "beleaguered," Wednesday's volley elevated the rhetoric to a new level.

The exchange comes at a time of heightened tension between the Justice Department and the White House, which is mired in special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Trump campaign ties to Russia and possible obstruction of justice. Trump has long viewed Sessions' decision to step aside from that investigation as leading to Mueller's appointment.

Sessions has become a Trump scapegoat, allowing the president to avoid some of the political consequences of directly attacking Mueller as his probe escalates.

Trump this time is angry that Sessions referred the allegations of employee misconduct to the inspector general, but that's exactly what that office is charged with doing. Its lawyers are part of the department and, contrary to Trump's claims, can and often do refer matters for prosecution.

The office has been working on a separate review of the FBI's handling of the Hillary Clinton email investigation under former Director James Comey, but that report is not late and is expected to be released around March or April.

Inspector General Michael Horowitz's office has acknowledged receiving Sessions' request but hasn't said it is

investigating. Horowitz was appointed to the post by President Barack Obama, as Trump noted. But years earlier, Horowitz was named in the Bush administration to a seat on the Sentencing Commission, suggesting he has more bipartisan bona fides than Trump acknowledges. Horowitz also launched the review of the FBI's handling of the Clinton case — the stated reason by Trump and Sessions for the dismissal of Comey in May.

GOP Rep. Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, recently one of the FBI's toughest critics, defended Horowitz as "fair, fact-centric and appropriately confidential with his work."

Until now, Sessions had largely keep quiet in the face of Trump's verbal and social media volleys, faithfully executing the president's agenda on guns, drugs, violent crime and illegal immigration. Some within Sessions' own department had criticized that silence as straining morale and making him seem too eager to appease the president at the risk of dangerously politicizing the institution.

The two bonded early in Trump's campaign. But Trump has not been able to get over Sessions' withdrawal from the Russia investigation and has relentlessly belittled him and pressured him to investigate political rivals. The criticism was so harsh that Sessions offered last year to resign; Trump refused.

Sessions has since tried to get back into Trump's good graces. His request of the inspector general should have appeased Trump, as White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders suggested Tuesday it would.

"It's something that he's clearly had frustration over so I would imagine he certainly support the decision to look into what we feel to be some wrongdoing," she said. "I think that's the role of the Department of Justice and we're glad that they're fulfilling that job."

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Sessions Pushes Back At Trump: I Will Work With 'Integrity And Honor'

By Bob Fredericks

New York Post, February 28, 2018

Embattled Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Wednesday defended himself after yet another attack from President Trump, saying he would "continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor."

The attorney general, one of Trump's favorite punching bags, was responding to the president calling him "DISGRACEFUL" on Twitter for not having Justice Department lawyers investigate the FBI's handling of FISA warrants.

"We have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure that complaints against this department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary," he said in a statement.

"This department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and the Constitution."

Trump was angry that Sessions had asked the department's inspector general, and not federal prosecutors, to examine the FBI's actions.

Trump Launches New Attack On Sessions: Disgraceful

By Jordan Fabian

The Hill, February 28, 2018

President Trump on Wednesday launched a new attack on Attorney General Jeff Sessions, calling it "disgraceful" that he has asked an inspector general and not Justice Department lawyers to investigate potential surveillance abuses.

The president said the Justice Department's inspector general is ill-equipped to probe allegations that the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) was improperly used to surveil members of his campaign team.

"Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse," Trump tweeted.

"Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 28, 2018

Jeff Sessions Fires Back At Trump Over Handling Of Justice Department Surveillance Probe

President calls referral of investigation to Justice Department watchdog 'disgraceful.' Attorney general says he'll act with 'integrity and honor'

By Del Quentin Wilber And Aruna Viswanatha

Wall Street Journal, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

'Disgraceful:' Trump's Latest Criticism Of Sessions On FISA Probe Is Ignorant And Embarrassing

By Guy Benson

Townhall, February 28, 2018

Cortney covered the president's tweet from this morning earlier, but I just wanted to add my two cents: Setting aside the unseemly spectacle of Trump routinely humiliating of his own Attorney General – whom he clearly wants to serve as his personal political lapdog – Sessions has been correct in each of the instances that have drawn his boss' ire. His recusal on the Russia probe was by the book, as recommended by the department's ethics lawyers, and his plan to refer the issue of potential Obama-era FISA abuses to the nonpartisan Inspector General is also completely appropriate. Here's Trump's latest tantrum:

The DOJ investigating itself is a fool's errand. The Trump DOJ probing the Obama DOJ's actions would be instantly dismissed as partisan retribution by many, many people – and evidence of any genuine wrongdoing would be needlessly tainted in the realm of public perception. The whole point of having a nonpartisan watchdog to oversee these agencies is to allow for independence and credibility. The Justice Department's IG was a Bush appointee before he was "an Obama guy" – and his near-complete review of the FBI's Hillary probe was apparently thorough and damning enough to get Andrew McCabe pre-emptively tossed out of his position. There's no reason to doubt the professionalism and dedication of Inspector General Horowitz. Trey Gowdy, a straight shooter, agrees:

If Trump wants a reckless, legal advice-ignoring Attorney General, he should fire Sessions. The former Alabama Senator is right to defend himself against this dumb outburst. Finally, I'll add: After being skeptical at first, I actually now agree that an independent probe into potential FISA overreach and abuses is in order. If Mueller doesn't cover that ground in his report, the Inspector General should dig into it. And based on those findings, prosecutorial actions could be undertaken, if appropriate. And by the way, it seems like a good time to point out that some dedicated public servants are proving themselves capable of carrying out their duties impartially, even after being targeted by Trump's ugliest and most appalling attacks:

Trump Vs. Jeff Sessions

If he really wants FBI answers, why not declassify everything?

Wall Street Journal, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Sessions Defends Integrity After Trump Attack Over FISA Probe

By Margaret Talev And Chris Strohm

Bloomberg News, February 28, 2018

Jeff Sessions defended his work as U.S. attorney general after President Donald Trump assailed him for not

ordering the Justice Department to investigate the agency's use of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act in its Russia probe.

Trump accused the attorney general of fumbling the investigation by leaving it to an independent inspector general. Sessions, who has been the subject of periodic attacks by Trump and repeated rumors that he is on the verge of dismissal, responded with a statement defending his integrity.

"We have initiated the appropriate process that will ensure complaints against this department will be fully and fairly acted upon if necessary," the former Republican senator said. "As long as I am the attorney general, I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor."

Hours earlier Trump unleashed his latest assault on the nation's top law enforcement official.

"Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse?" the U.S. president wrote in a tweet that was also critical of the IG, Michael Horowitz. "Will take forever, has no prosecutorial power and already late with reports on Comey etc. Isn't the I.G. an Obama guy? Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Horowitz is investigating the FBI and Justice Department's handling of an investigation into former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's email arrangements. Trump fired FBI director James Comey last year in part, he said, because of that investigation. 'Fair, Fact Centric'

The Republican chairman of the House Oversight Committee, Trey Gowdy, who regularly clashed with the Obama administration and Clinton, defended Horowitz as an impartial investigator.

"I have had a number of interactions with Inspector General Horowitz, including as recently as earlier this month," Gowdy said in a statement. "He has been fair, fact centric, and appropriately confidential with his work."

"He was confirmed by the U.S. Senate without a single dissent," Gowdy said. "I have complete confidence in him and hope he is given the time, the resources and the independence to complete his work."

The Justice Department declined to comment on Trump's tweet, spokesman Ian Prior said in an email. The Office of Inspector General says on its website that it's "a statutorily created independent entity whose mission is to detect and deter waste, fraud, abuse, and misconduct in DOJ programs and personnel, and to promote economy and efficiency in those programs."

Fact-Checking Dueling Claims on Alleged Bias in the Russia Probe

Sessions told reporters on Tuesday that the inspector general would look into Republican claims that FISA standards were abused in the early stages of the FBI investigation into Trump campaign associates and ties to

Russians. Trump's decision to weigh in adds new fuel to concerns about presidential interference that could undermine the Justice Department's independence.

"The inspector general will take that as one of the matters they'll deal with," Sessions said on Tuesday, concluding that it is "just the appropriate thing."

Republican members of the House Intelligence Committee, led by Chairman Devin Nunes, have alleged that the FBI and Justice Department were biased against Trump in their handling of the probe into Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential campaign. A memo that the Republican lawmakers released on Feb. 2 asserts that officials relied primarily on an unverified dossier prepared by former British spy Christopher Steele to obtain a surveillance warrant on Carter Page, a foreign policy adviser on Trump's campaign. The dossier was largely funded by Clinton's campaign and Democrats.

Democratic members of the House Intelligence Committee, led by their top-ranking member, Adam Schiff, disputed the claims in their own memo, released in redacted form on Saturday.

Democrats say the Steele dossier wasn't part of the FBI's decision to open its counterintelligence investigation, which began in July 2016, well before the bureau received the dossier in September of that year. While the dossier was cited in the FBI's initial FISA warrant application in October 2016, the bureau "cited multiple sources to support the case for surveilling Page" and made only "narrow use" of information from Steele's sources, according to the Democratic memo.

Page had been on the FBI's radar for many years and a Russian intelligence officer targeted him for recruitment, according to the Democratic memo. The Page warrant was also renewed three times – in January 2017, April 2017 and June 2017 – which requires evidence that the surveillance was bearing fruit.

— With assistance by Toluse Olorunnipa, and Billy House

Mueller Investigation Examining Trump's Apparent Efforts To Oust Sessions In July

By Devlin Barrett, Josh Dawsey And Rosalind S. Helderman

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Special counsel Robert S. Mueller III has been investigating a period of time last summer when President Trump seemed determined to drive Attorney General Jeff Sessions from his job, according to people familiar with the matter who said that a key area of interest for the inquiry is whether those efforts were part of a months-long pattern of attempted obstruction of justice.

In recent months, Mueller's team has questioned witnesses in detail about Trump's private comments and state of mind in late July and early August of last year, around the time he issued a series of tweets belittling his "beleaguered" attorney general, these people said. The thrust of the questions was to determine whether the president's goal was to oust Sessions in order to pick a replacement who would exercise control over the investigation into possible coordination between Russia and Trump associates during the 2016 election, these people said.

The issue of Sessions's tortured relationship with the president reared up again Wednesday morning when the president tweeted: "Why is A.G. Jeff Sessions asking the Inspector General to investigate potentially massive FISA abuse. ... Why not use Justice Department lawyers? DISGRACEFUL!"

Sessions usually opts not to respond to such criticism, but in this case he did. Trump's criticism faulted the attorney general for not more aggressively pursuing claims that the FBI and Justice Department may have misled a foreign surveillance court on a politically sensitive case in the waning days of the Obama administration. Sessions insisted in his statement that he had reacted appropriately by referring the matter to the department's inspector general for a possible review of how the surveillance case was handled.

"As long as I am the Attorney General, I will continue to discharge my duties with integrity and honor, and this Department will continue to do its work in a fair and impartial manner according to the law and Constitution," Sessions said in the statement.

It's no secret in Washington that the relationship between the president and the attorney general has been badly broken for months. The president has repeatedly issued public broadsides, calling Sessions "weak" or criticizing his leadership of the Justice Department, despite the attorney general's frequent proclamations of devotion to Trump's agenda on immigration and crime.

Behind the scenes, Trump has derisively referred to Sessions as "Mr. Magoo," a cartoon character who is elderly, myopic and bumbling, according to people with whom he has spoken. Trump has told associates that he has hired the best lawyers for his entire life, but is stuck with Sessions, who is not defending him and is not sufficiently loyal.

While Sessions has told associates he had been wounded by the attacks, he has also insisted he's not going to resign, so the cold war continues.

On the anniversary of Sessions's confirmation earlier this month, senior aides decided to buy Sessions a bulletproof vest with his name emblazoned on it as a gift, according to a person familiar with the matter.

While there is a soap-opera element to the drama between the country's chief executive and chief law enforcement officer, Mueller apparently has decided there are

significant issues at stake for the probe into whether the president or others in the White House sought to obstruct justice, according to the people familiar with the matter.

The New York Times has previously reported that Mueller was examining Trump's efforts in the spring of 2017 to fire Sessions. People familiar with the probe said the special counsel is also examining the period in late July in which the president sought to publicly shame the attorney general into quitting.

Spokesmen for the Justice Department, the special counsel and the White House declined to comment.

In mid-July, Trump started escalating his public criticisms of Sessions, including angry tweets. Around that time, according to people familiar with internal White House discussions, the president discussed firing Sessions or forcing him out of the Justice Department. Those discussions are of particular interest to Mueller's investigators, as they seek to determine the president's intentions, according to a person familiar with the probe.

At the time, a White House adviser told a Washington Post reporter that Trump was "stunned" that Sessions had not yet quit. The president, this adviser added, had been hoping the attorney general would be so embarrassed by Trump's scathing comments that he would leave.

Trump in this period also ordered his then-chief of staff, Reince Priebus, to get a resignation letter from Sessions. It was not his first request for such a letter, but Priebus hesitated, declining to make the request outright. Conservatives rallied to Sessions's defense, particularly in Congress, and Trump backed down.

Every Cabinet official can be fired by the president at any time for any reason. If Mueller's team sought to make Trump's efforts to oust the attorney general part of a pattern of attempted obstruction, it would have to offer evidence showing he had a corrupt motive in doing so — such as changing the direction of the Russia probe.

Trump's Wednesday criticism seemed to have another intended target at the Justice Department — Inspector General Michael E. Horowitz. For more than a year, his office has been investigating how the Justice Department and the FBI handled the 2016 probe of Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server when she was secretary of state. His findings are expected to be made public soon.

Trump's comments Wednesday seemed to serve a dual purpose — attack Sessions, and urge Horowitz to speed up the release of his findings. The White House and some of Trump's conservative supporters in Congress have urged the appointment of a second special counsel to conduct a criminal investigation into how senior FBI and Justice Department personnel handled matters related to Clinton.

Justice Department veterans have long worried that Trump's repeated public attacks on the department and the

FBI are undermining the legitimacy of those agencies, which could cause lasting damage to federal law enforcement.

"The continued drumbeat of overheated attacks on the Justice Department and the FBI, coming from all corners of the Hill, the media, and elsewhere, can't help but undermine both morale and the legitimacy of institutions themselves, but today's tweet is just another drop in an already overflowing bucket," said Jamil Jaffer, founder of the National Security Institute at the Antonin Scalia Law School at George Mason University. "Of course, the bigger challenge is that if the concerns aren't legitimate, then we are playing right into the hands of those abroad who wish to undermine these very critical institutions of our democracy."

Matt Zapotosky, Julie Tate and Sari Horwitz contributed to this report.

13 House Republicans Call On Sessions To Appoint Second Special Counsel

By Julia Manchester

The Hill, February 28, 2018

Thirteen House Republicans are calling on Attorney General Jeff Sessions to appoint a second special counsel to investigate Hillary Clinton.

The conservative lawmakers sent a letter to Sessions on Wednesday requesting that he appoint a special counsel to investigate the end of the Clinton email probe, the start of the investigation into Russia's election meddling and alleged surveillance abuses by the FBI.

"We acknowledge with immense gratitude that nearly every single man and woman in the [Department of Justice] and the FBI conduct themselves daily with integrity, independence, patriotism, objectivity, and commitment to the rule of law," the letter reads. "That is why this Special Counsel is of utmost importance to ensure that these historic, legendary, and necessary agencies move forward more respected and effective than before."

The letter's signers were GOP Reps. Lee Zeldin (N.Y.), Mark Meadows (N.C.), Jim Jordan (Ohio), Claudia Tenney (N.Y.), Francis Rooney (Fla.), Matt Gaetz (Fla.), Ted Budd (N.C.), Jody Hice (Ga.), Scott Perry (Pa.), Paul Gosar (Ariz.), Andy Harris (Md.), Louie Gohmert (Texas) and Dave Brat (Va.).

Jordan and Meadows have been calling for a second special counsel since January after revelations surfaced that the FBI did not save five months worth of text messages between two FBI agents who have been accused of pro-Clinton and anti-Trump bias during the 2016 presidential race.

Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee earlier this month released a memo claiming that senior officials at the FBI and Department of Justice (DOJ) abused their powers to spy on members of the Trump campaign.

The four-page memo accused the DOJ of obtaining surveillance warrants on Page.

Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee last week released their countermemo that refutes the GOP memo.

"Our extensive review of the initial [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act] application and three subsequent renewals failed to uncover any evidence of illegal, unethical, or unprofessional behavior by law enforcement and instead revealed that both the FBI and DOJ made extensive showings to justify all four requests," the committee's ranking Democrat Adam Schiff (Calif.) said.

White House Communications Director Hope Hicks Resigning

By Zeke Miller And Jill Colvin

Associated Press, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House Communications Director Hope Hicks, one of President Donald Trump's closest and most loyal aides, is resigning.

The departure of one of the president's longest-serving advisers, who worked as a one-woman communications shop during his winning campaign, came as a surprise to most in the White House — and cast a pall over the West Wing at a tumultuous time. The news comes a day after Hicks was interviewed for nine hours by the House panel investigating Russia interference in the 2016 election and contact between Trump's campaign and Russia.

In a statement, Trump praised Hicks for her work over the last three years, saying he "will miss having her by my side."

Hicks, who occupied the desk closest to the Oval Office in the West Wing, has been a central participant in or witness to nearly every milestone and controversy of the Trump campaign and White House. She began her White House tenure as director of strategic communications — a title that only partly captured her more expansive role as the president's gatekeeper to the press.

Hicks acknowledged to a House intelligence panel Tuesday that she has occasionally told "white lies" for Trump. But she said she had not lied about anything relevant to the Russia investigation. She has also been interviewed by special counsel Robert Mueller's team about her role in crafting a statement about Donald Trump Jr.'s 2016 meeting with Russians, as Mueller's expansive probe of Russian interference in the 2016 election and potential misdeeds committed by those in the president's orbit moves ever closer to the Oval Office.

Hicks' departure leaves a vacuum in the White House communications team, and in the president's collection of trusted aides. The announcement came a day after a similar announcement about the impending departure of deputy

communications director Josh Raffel, and just a few days after senior adviser Jared Kushner saw his security clearance downgraded — limiting his access to classified information.

"I can't imagine anyone here leaving a bigger hole in the White House than Hope on her departure," said White House lawyer Ty Cobb.

White House officials and outside advisers suggested Hicks' departure would strengthen chief of staff John Kelly's control over what has been an oftentimes chaotic West Wing.

In a statement, Kelly said Hicks had become "a trusted adviser and counselor," but behind the scenes the pair had occasionally clashed over her more informal role. Kelly had begrudgingly supported making Hicks communications director after the short-lived tenure of Anthony Scaramucci, in an effort to integrate her role into the rest of the White House's communications strategy.

Hicks' departure is just the latest manifestation of historic staff churn in the Trump administration.

Hicks said in a statement, "There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump." She added she wished Trump and his administration the "very best."

A former Ralph Lauren fashion model and public relations pro who worked for Trump's daughter Ivanka, Hicks, 29, had no political background when Trump asked her to serve on his campaign.

Before Wednesday's announcement, Hicks had not been happy for some time, according to two people with knowledge of her thinking who were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly. One person said Hicks had been increasingly feeling the stress of the position.

She was an unconventional campaign press secretary, rarely mixing it up with reporters, almost never giving interviews and, despite Trump's fondness for cable, staying off TV. She spoke at a rally exactly once in December 2016, after Trump beseeched her "to say a couple of words."

She said nine: "Hi. Merry Christmas everyone, and thank you, Donald Trump."

Within the White House, she was seen as a stabilizing force on Trump, who at times would grow unhappy when she was not around. As the West Wing was riven by rivalries in the early months of the administration, she allied herself with Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner in opposition, at times, to the nationalist forces led by then-chief strategist Steve Bannon.

Hicks, who has long tried to avoid media attention, was thrust into the spotlight recently when it was revealed she had been dating former Staff Secretary Rob Porter. He left the administration after accusations that he had abused his two ex-wives became public.

Hicks helped craft the White House's initial supportive response.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters that Hicks would remain at the White House "for several weeks" and denied that Hicks' decision to leave had anything to do with her lengthy testimony before the House Intelligence Committee.

"Don't try to read more into it than exists," Sanders said. "This is something that she's been thinking about for a while."

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Hope Hicks Is Resigning From The White House

By Jim Acosta, Jeremy Diamond, Kaitlan Collins And Kevin Liptak

CNN, February 28, 2018

(CNN)White House communications director Hope Hicks, one of President Donald Trump's longest-serving and closest aides, is resigning, the White House confirmed Wednesday.

Hicks' departure capped her meteoric rise from Trump Organization communications aide to the upper crust of power in Washington in just a few years, during which Hicks sought to maintain a remarkably low profile for someone in her position.

Her resignation will undoubtedly reverberate for months to come inside the West Wing, where Trump will find himself for the first time in more than three years without the constant presence of his most loyal aide — who is among the handful of aides who worked with Trump at his company, during the rollicking campaign and into the White House.

Hicks acknowledges white lies, but won't talk White House in testimony

Hicks' resignation came a day after she testified before the House Intelligence Committee and said she had told white lies in the course of her duties, though there was no indication the two were connected. A source familiar with her thinking said she first seriously considered resigning in the wake of the scandal involving former senior aide Rob Porter, whose public defense Hicks helped craft while also dating him at the time.

A tearful Hicks announced her departure to the White House communications team Wednesday afternoon, a source inside the room told CNN. She referenced how many years she had worked for Trump, said she has always wanted the best for him and that she felt like now was the right time to go — which some in the room took as a reference to the speculation she's leaving in light of her testimony. She thanked the team and said she will miss them all.

Hicks won't leave immediately but she expected to depart in the next few weeks.

The President, who one source said found out on Wednesday that she had made a final decision to leave, praised Hicks as "outstanding."

"She is as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person. I will miss having her by my side but when she approached me about pursuing other opportunities, I totally understood. I am sure we will work together again in the future," Trump said in a written statement on Wednesday.

In a statement, Hicks thanked Trump and the administration, saying: "There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump. I wish the President and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country."

The New York Times first reported her departure.

Void created

She is Hope Hicks' pinch hitter

It was not immediately clear who will replace Hicks as White House communications director – a position that has now been filled by four individuals – but some of Hicks' duties have increasingly been filled over the last two months by Mercedes Schlapp, the senior adviser for strategic communications. While Hicks was busy fighting the crisis of the day at the President's side or meeting with her lawyers, Schlapp stepped in to lead the communications team, sources told CNN earlier this month.

Regardless of who replaces her, the White House will be hard-pressed to find another aide who understands the President and knows how to work with him as well as Hicks does. Trump allies digested the news with surprise, finding it hard to imagine Trump without Hicks at his side.

"I'm just floored," one Trump ally said. "I don't think it's possible to overstate the significance and just the importance of her role within the White House. She's an invaluable team member and one of the originals."

Multiple sources insisted Wednesday that Hicks was in no way forced out of her position, but Hicks' close relationship with Trump at times chafed at the strict protocols Kelly has sought to impose. But Hick's access to Trump was never really in question, despite Kelly's efforts to streamline the access of other top officials, the people said.

But Hicks and Kelly enjoyed an amiable working relationship and did not feud in the way the retired Marine general has with other top officials, people familiar with their dynamic said.

Kelly's initial concern with Hicks was the uncertain nature of her role when he took over in July. He pushed to have her assume the duties of communications director to better define her position and place her within the West Wing hierarchy.

Path ahead

At just 29, Hicks is now expected to return to the private sector with the heading of former White House communications director, a label of prestige that can unlock

top positions at blue chip companies, six-figure TV deals and profitable, best-selling books.

Some of those could be in the offing for Hicks, who has remained a mystery to many Americans despite her proximity to power and influential role.

But Hicks will not exit the White House unstained, having drawn the scrutiny of special counsel Robert Mueller over her role in crafting the misleading statement about Donald Trump Jr.'s meeting with a Russian lawyer promising dirt on Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign.

Hicks was one of the White House officials involved in crafting the statement aboard Air Force One that claimed Trump Jr., the President's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and then-campaign chairman Paul Manafort took the meeting with the lawyer primarily to discuss US policy on Russian adoptions – rather than because Trump Jr. believed the lawyer would provide incriminating information on Clinton from the Russian government.

Hicks also came under fire more recently over her involvement in crafting the White House's initial defense of Rob Porter, the White House staff secretary who resigned in disgrace after two of his ex-wives publicly accused him of domestic abuse.

Hicks, who at the time was dating Porter, did not recuse herself from the matter. Instead, she urged other White House officials to put out a robust defense of Porter in the face of the allegations.

Hicks was one of Trump's first hires as he assembled a lean team of aides who would launch his improbable presidential campaign. From then until his election, she was a constant presence by his side – traveling to nearly every rally, hovering within earshot during interviews and always prepared to type out a bombastic tweet as dictated by her boss.

Hicks, who first entered the White House as director of strategic communications, rose to the position of communications director after her predecessor Anthony Scaramucci flamed out in just 10 days, after attacking fellow White House aides in a vulgarity-laden interview.

The pick marked a 180-degree turn from the White House's earlier attempts to install a seasoned Republican strategist in the communications director post and was a tacit acknowledgment that wooing such a candidate was likely not in the cards.

The Greenwich, Connecticut, native officially entered Trump's orbit in 2014, after the President's daughter Ivanka Trump poached Hicks from the public affairs firm where Trump had been a client. Soon enough, Hicks was working directly for the family patriarch at the Trump Organization and he asked her in 2015 to join his campaign as his press secretary.

Hope Hicks To Resign As White House Communications Director

By Maggie Haberman

New York Times, February 28, 2018

Hope Hicks, the White House communications director and one of President Trump's longest-serving advisers, said Wednesday that she was resigning.

Ms. Hicks, 29, a former model who joined Mr. Trump's 2016 presidential campaign without any experience in politics, became known as one of the few aides who understood his personality and style and could challenge the president to change his views.

Ms. Hicks had been considering leaving for several months. She told colleagues that she had accomplished what she felt she could with a job that made her one of the most powerful people in Washington, and that there would never be a perfect moment to leave, according to White House aides.

Her resignation came a day after she testified for eight hours before the House Intelligence Committee, telling the panel that in her job, she had occasionally been required to tell white lies but had never lied about anything connected to the investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election.

She did not say what her next job would be, and her departure date was unclear, but it is likely to be in the next few weeks.

Ms. Hicks said that she had "no words" to express her gratitude to the president, who responded with his own statement.

"Hope is outstanding and has done great work for the last three years," Mr. Trump said. "She is as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person. I will miss having her by my side, but when she approached me about pursuing other opportunities, I totally understood. I am sure we will work together again in the future."

As communications director, Ms. Hicks worked to stabilize, to some extent, a fractious press department of about 40 people who were often at odds with one another in 2017. She maintained one of the lowest public profiles of anyone to ever hold the job, declining to sit for interviews or appear at the White House briefing room podium. That mystique added to the outsize attention she received.

"I quickly realized what so many have learned about Hope: She is strategic, poised and wise beyond her years," said John F. Kelly, the White House chief of staff. "She became a trusted adviser and counselor, and did a tremendous job overseeing the communications for the president's agenda including the passage of historic tax reform. She has served her country with great distinction. To say that she will be missed is an understatement."

Hope Hicks Resigning From White House Communications Role

By Steven Nelson, Gabby Morrongiello

Washington Examiner, February 28, 2018

White House communications director Hope Hicks will leave the White House in the coming weeks.

Hicks, 29, served as President Trump's campaign spokesperson before following him to the White House. White House press secretary Sarah Sanders confirmed the news to the Washington Examiner Wednesday.

Sanders said the decision has "nothing at all whatsoever" to do with Hicks' testimony to the House Intelligence Committee on Tuesday. That testimony lasted eight hours as a part of their investigation into possible Trump campaign collusion with Russia.

Sanders added there's "no definitive timeline" on when she'll leave her role.

Hicks recently became the focus of intense media coverage when her reported boyfriend, former White House staff secretary Rob Porter, was accused by both of his ex-wives of abuse.

Sanders told a group of reporters Wednesday that Hicks "had been thinking about it before" the Porter controversy and said Trump "is not unhappy with her in any way" after Hicks reportedly testified that she told white lies on Trump's behalf.

"Guys, quit trying to make this a scandal. It's not. Don't try to read more into it than exists," Sanders said. "This is something she's been thinking about for awhile. So maybe it's surprising for you guys but it's not like it happened overnight."

In an afternoon statement confirming her departure, Hicks said: "There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump. I wish the President and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country."

Trump said in a statement that "Hope is outstanding and has done great work for the last three years."

"She is as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person," he said. "I will miss having her by my side, but when she approached me about pursuing other opportunities, I totally understood. I am sure we will work together again in the future."

The White House did not immediately say who would replace Hicks and said her last day will be "sometime in the next few weeks."

Hope Hicks, Trump's Communication Director, Will Depart White House

By Gregory Korte

USA Today, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — Hope Hicks, the White House official most responsible for guarding President Trump's public image, will leave the White House, officials said Wednesday.

Hicks, 29, was the fourth White House communications director of the Trump White House, and the longest serving — following the often chaotic tenures of Sean Spicer, Michael Dubke and Anthony Scaramucci. She has worked for Trump inside and outside of the White House longer than any other senior administration official.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said the resignation will take effect in the coming weeks or months.

"There is no definitive timeline," Sanders said. Her resignation was first reported by the New York Times.

The announcement comes the day after Hicks declined to answer questions from a House committee investigating whether the Trump campaign colluded with Russian agents during the 2016 presidential election.

Hope Hicks To Resign As White House Communications Director

By Bob Fredericks

New York Post, February 28, 2018

White House Communications Director Hope Hicks, one of President Trump's most loyal aides, said Wednesday that she was going to resign.

The news comes a day after Hicks, 29, was interviewed for nine hours by a panel investigating Russia interference in the 2016 election and contact between Trump's campaign and Russia.

She acknowledged to the House Intelligence Committee that she has occasionally told "white lies" for Trump.

But she said she had not lied about anything relevant to the Russia investigation.

Hicks served as Trump's one-woman communications shop during his winning campaign and has remained one of his most trusted aides.

Hicks said she had "no words" to express her thanks to the president, who praised her in a statement.

"Hope is outstanding and has done great work for the last three years.

She is as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person," Trump said.

"I will miss having her by my side but when she approached me about pursuing other opportunities, I totally understood. I am sure we will work together again in the future."

"I can't imagine anyone here leaving a bigger hole in the White House than Hope on her departure," said White House lawyer Ty Cobb.

Hicks, who occupied the desk closest to the Oval Office in the West Wing, has been a central participant in or witness to nearly every milestone and controversy of the Trump campaign and White House.

She began her White House tenure as director of strategic communications — a title that only partly captured her more expansive role as the president's gatekeeper to the press.

She came under fire recently over her involvement in drafting the White House's initial defense of Rob Porter, the White House staff secretary who resigned after two of his ex-wives publicly accused him of domestic abuse.

Hicks, who at the time was dating Porter, urged a fierce defense of Porter.

She has also been interviewed by special counsel Robert Mueller's team about her role in crafting a statement about Donald Trump Jr.'s 2016 meeting with Russians, as Mueller's probe of Russian interference in the 2016 election and potential misdeeds committed by those in the president's orbit moves ever closer to the Oval Office.

White House officials and outside advisers suggested Hicks' departure would strengthen chief of staff John Kelly's control over what has been an oftentimes chaotic West Wing.

In a statement, Kelly said Hicks had become "a trusted adviser and counselor," but behind the scenes, the pair had occasionally clashed over her more informal role.

Kelly had begrudgingly supported making Hicks communications director after the short-lived tenure of Anthony Scaramucci, in an effort to integrate her role into the rest of the White House's communications strategy.

Hope Hicks To Leave White House

The White House said she would leave 'in the next few weeks.'

By Darren Samuelsohn

Politico, February 28, 2018

White House communications director Hope Hicks said Wednesday she plans to resign, leaving President Donald Trump without one of his longest-serving aides and strongest defenders.

"There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump," Hicks said in a statement provided by the White House, in which she did not say what she planned to do next. "I wish the President and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country."

Hicks was one of the first people to join Trump's 2016 presidential bid, and she was nearly always at his side on the campaign trail and in the White House. But her decision to exit came after she drew scrutiny amid several minefields facing the administration.

On Tuesday, she declined to answer many questions during an appearance before House investigators looking into

Russian interference in the 2016 election. Earlier this month, she was drawn into the controversy surrounding former staff secretary Rob Porter, who she had been dating and who resigned amid claims of physical and verbal abuse from two ex-wives.

Her date of departure was not immediately clear, but the White House said she would leave "in the next few weeks."

"She'll be incredibly difficult to replace," White House attorney Ty Cobb, who has been serving as the official point person for the president's response to the Russia probe, told POLITICO. "She couldn't have been a more supportive or talented ally to me."

Hope Hicks Resigns From White House

By Jordan Fabian And Avery Anapol

The Hill, February 28, 2018

Hope Hicks, one of President Trump's most loyal and trusted advisers, said Wednesday she will resign as White House communications director.

With Hicks's departure, the president is losing a valued aide who has been at his side since before he launched his long-shot bid for the presidency in 2015.

"There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump. I wish the president and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country," Hicks said in a statement.

The 29-year-old adviser, who had no previous political experience, indicated she approached Trump recently to tell him that she wanted to leave in order to explore opportunities outside the White House. She did not say whether she has another job lined up.

Hicks has no set departure date but is expected to officially exit in the next few weeks, according to the White House.

"Hope is outstanding and has done great work for the last three years," Trump said in a statement Wednesday. "She is as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person. I will miss having her by my side but when she approached me about pursuing other opportunities, I totally understood. I am sure we will work together again in the future."

The announcement of Hicks's resignation comes one day after she sat for a marathon interview with the House Intelligence Committee as part of its investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election.

Hicks frustrated some committee members by refusing to answer questions about events during the presidential transition and after Trump took office.

During her testimony, Hicks reportedly admitted that her job in the Trump administration required her to tell "white lies."

Her exit from the White House means that Trump is losing his longest-serving political aide. The former model

and public-relations professional was named communications director last summer after Anthony Scaramucci's tumultuous 11-day tenure.

Hicks was tasked with stabilizing the White House's press operation that often clashed with other officials in the West Wing and spearheading its responses to multiple crises that have wracked the administration.

But Hicks's role came under scrutiny earlier this month in the aftermath of the domestic abuse allegations against former White House staff secretary Rob Porter. Hicks reportedly helped arrange public statements that were supportive of Porter, whom she was dating at the time.

The staff secretary eventually resigned after photos emerged that purportedly showed the bruised face of one of his ex-wives.

Despite that, Hicks earned praise from top White House officials for her ability to operate in Trump's inner circle while maintaining a quiet public profile.

"When I became chief of staff, I quickly realized what so many have learned about Hope – she is strategic, poised and wise beyond her years," chief of staff John Kelly said in a statement Wednesday.

"She became a trusted adviser and counselor and did a tremendous job overseeing the communications for the president's agenda including the passage of historic tax reform," Kelly added. "She has served her country with great distinction. To say that she will be missed, is an understatement."

News of Hick's resignation comes one day after deputy communications director Josh Raffel announced he would leave the White House.

Raffel worked closely with first daughter Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner, both White House senior advisers. Hicks first entered Trump's orbit when she did work for Ivanka Trump's fashion line while working at a New York PR firm.

The positions of communications adviser has seen unprecedented turnover in the Trump White House. Hicks's successor will be the sixth person named to serve in the role in less than two years.

The New York Times first reported that Hicks would leave the White House.

Updated: 5:15 p.m.

White House Communications Director Hope Hicks To Resign

By Philip Rucker And Ashley Parker

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Hope Hicks, the White House communications director and one of President Trump's longest-serving and closest political advisers, said Wednesday that she is leaving the administration sometime in the next few weeks.

Hicks, 29, began working for Trump before he announced his candidacy and has been a constant at his side over the past three years, managing his public image and advising him on policy and other matters. A political neophyte, Hicks exerted extraordinary influence in the White House as arguably Trump's most trusted aide.

The announcement of her departure comes one day after Hicks testified for a full day Tuesday before the House Intelligence Committee in its investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election. Her exit was first reported by the New York Times.

Officials said Hicks had decided in recent weeks to leave the administration and told Trump she wanted to explore opportunities outside of the government.

"There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump," Hicks said in a statement. "I wish the President and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country."

In his own statement, Trump said, "Hope is outstanding and has done great work for the last three years. She is as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person. I will miss having her by my side but when she approached me about pursuing other opportunities, I totally understood. I am sure we will work together again in the future."

Hicks had been contemplating leaving the White House for several weeks and told friends that she was relieved to finally announce her move, a senior White House official said. She felt three years was a long time to work in the whirlwind of the Trump orbit, with crises occurring by the day and sometimes by the hour, and was eager to try something new and return home to her family in Connecticut.

Hicks was crying as news of her impending departure rippled through Washington and beyond, the senior official said. Though she had told key West Wing aides of her plans, she had not had an opportunity to brief the whole White House communications team until shortly after The Times reported that she had told the newspaper she was leaving, the official said.

Hicks also has made clear to friends that she could see herself working for Trump again in the future, including potentially the 2020 reelection campaign.

A former fashion model, Hicks first entered Trump's universe as a public relations consultant to his daughter, Ivanka. She then went to work directly for Ivanka Trump's company, from where she was recruited to join Donald Trump's presidential campaign in its infancy.

By her own admission, Hicks knew little to nothing about politics. But she had a preternatural ability to manage Trump's whims and appetites, soothe his moods and shape his public image to his liking. On the campaign trail, Hicks was more than a press secretary. She was a multitasking strategist and confidante, almost always at the candidate's side.

Hicks arrived in Washington as an unconventional press staffer managing Trump's personal image and his interactions with reporters, but quickly assumed more responsibility in the West Wing. Last summer, she was named communications director, overseeing a staff of dozens and responsible for the administration's overall communications strategy.

White House chief of staff John F. Kelly praised Hicks and said her leadership in the West Wing will be missed.

"When I became Chief of Staff, I quickly realized what so many have learned about Hope — she is strategic, poised and wise beyond her years," Kelly said. "She became a trusted adviser and counselor and did a tremendous job overseeing the communications for the President's agenda including the passage of historic tax reform. She has served her country with great distinction. To say that she will be missed, is an understatement."

Hope Hicks Resigning As White House Communications Director

By S.A. Miller

Washington Times, February 28, 2018

White House Communications Director Hope Hicks, who has been at President Trump's side since before the 2016 campaign, announced her resignation Wednesday.

The exit of Ms. Hicks, 29, a former model who has been a key player but kept mostly behind the scenes both on the campaign trail and at the White House, shocked Washington.

"There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump," she said in a statement released by the White House. "I wish the President and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country."

Her departure, first reported by the New York Times and then confirmed by administration officials, is the latest in a series of shakeups for the White House communications team.

The startling announcement came a day after Ms. Hicks testified before the House intelligence committee's Russia probe, saying she had told "white lies" to the president but denying the campaign in any way colluded with Moscow.

In a statement, Mr. Trump commended her work and called her "outstanding."

"She is as smart and thoughtful as they come, a truly great person. I will miss having her by my side, but when she approached me about pursuing other opportunities, I totally understood. I am sure we will work together again in the future," the president said.

White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly also praised Ms. Hicks.

"I quickly realized what so many have learned about Hope: She is strategic, poised and wise beyond her years,"

Mr. Kelly said in a statement. "She became a trusted adviser and counselor, and did a tremendous job overseeing the communications for the president's agenda including the passage of historic tax reform. She has served her country with great distinction. To say that she will be missed is an understatement."

Ms. Hicks was the fourth communications director for Mr. Trump, following Mike Dubke, Sean Spicer — who temporary served in an acting capacity — and Anthony Scaramucci.

Ms. Hicks held the post for the longest duration. She lasted more than six months.

Mr. Scaramucci lasted just 10 days.

On Tuesday, Ms. Hicks underwent almost nine hours of closed-door testimony on Capitol Hill, answering queries about the presidential campaign and certain aspects of the transition period after Mr. Trump's November 2016 victory.

She declined to discuss her work after the inauguration.

According to multiple lawmakers, Ms. Hicks' unwillingness to answer questions represented the latest in a pattern of Trump aides alluding to the legal concept of executive privilege — which protects the confidentiality of presidential decision-making by allowing the president, and at times his staff, to keep certain information from the courts, Congress and the public.

"This is not executive privilege; this is executive stonewalling," Rep. Adam B. Schiff of California, the committee's top Democrat, told reporters when the hearing broke up.

Ms. Hicks reportedly has been interviewed by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and special counsel Robert Mueller's team regarding the Russia investigation.

Interest in the Russian investigations into her activities revolved around her role in crafting the White House communications response to a 2016 meeting between members of the Trump campaign — including the president's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr. — and a Russian lawyer at Trump Tower in New York.

When news of the meeting broke last summer, Donald Trump Jr. released a statement saying that the meeting had been about Russian adoptions. Later, he acknowledged that he took the meeting because the Russian lawyer had offered damaging information about his father's rival for the presidency, Hillary Clinton.

Speculation had swirled on Capitol Hill for months over what Ms. Hicks knew about the original, misleading statement about adoption.

Trump Top Communications Aide Hicks Resigns: White House

By Steve Holland

Reuters, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

Hope Hicks, Trump's Communications Director, To Resign

Has been an adviser to the president since the his campaign for the White House

By Rebecca Ballhaus

Wall Street Journal, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Hope Hicks Will Resign As White House Communications Director

By Margaret Talev

Bloomberg News, February 28, 2018

Hope Hicks, one of President Donald Trump's longest serving advisers and closest aides, will resign, the White House said a day after she testified to congressional investigators probing Russia's meddling in the 2016 election.

Hicks was named White House communications director in September, but was on Trump's staff from the beginning of his presidency. Prior to joining the Trump campaign, she had worked in public relations for the Trump Organization.

"I wish the president and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country," Hicks, 29, said in a statement released by the White House.

She won't leave the White House immediately, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said. The New York Times reported earlier that she was resigning.

"Hope is outstanding and has done great work for the last three years," Trump said in a statement.

She is the latest of several recent high-profile departures from Trump's White House. Another communications aide, Josh Raffel, said Tuesday he would resign. A top technology aide, Reed Cordish, said earlier this month he would leave. Staff Secretary Rob Porter resigned earlier this month after reports that he had been accused of domestic violence by two ex-wives.

Hicks testified for about nine hours in private to the House Intelligence Committee on Tuesday. Hicks told the panel that if Trump's former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, had gone through the same level of background checks as other Trump campaign aides, he never would have gotten the campaign's top job, a House official familiar with the testimony said.

She also told the panel that she occasionally was required tell "white lies" in her job, but later clarified that did not apply to substantive matters, the official said.

Hicks was involved in the reporting of a damaging book on the White House, Michael Wolff's "Fire and Fury," that was published earlier this year. Hicks and another senior aide, Kellyanne Conway, were the first officials to consider a pitch from the author in February 2017, though they didn't commit to officially participate in the book.

Hicks later told other Trump aides to speak with Wolff as long as they made positive comments, and some senior-most staff in the White House believed that Hicks had authorized their cooperation with the book, according to people familiar with the matter.

She was also romantically linked to Porter before the revelations of his history with his ex-wives.

CNN: Trump 'Berated' Hicks After House Intel Testimony

By Brandon Carter

The Hill, February 28, 2018

President Trump reportedly berated former White House communications director Hope Hicks the day before her resignation, according to a new report.

CNN's Erin Burnett reported Wednesday that Trump was angry with Hicks following her closed-door testimony to the House Intelligence Committee, in which she reportedly revealed she was sometimes required to tell "white lies" as part of her work in the White House.

Burnett reported one of Trump's "close allies" told CNN that Trump asked Hicks after her testimony "how she could be so stupid."

"Apparently, that was the final straw for Hope Hicks," Burnett said.

Hicks, one of Trump's closest advisers, announced her resignation from the White House Wednesday.

"There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump. I wish the president and his administration the very best as he continues to lead our country," Hicks said in a statement announcing her departure.

The 29-year-old has served as a top adviser to Trump since he launched his presidential campaign in 2015.

Hicks has set no departure date but is expected to leave the White House in the next few weeks, White House officials said.

Her departure comes one day after her lengthy interview with the House Intelligence panel as part of its investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

During her testimony, Hicks refused to answer questions about events that happened during the presidential transition and after Trump took office.

She also reportedly admitted that her job in the Trump administration required her to tell "white lies," although she denied that she lied about anything relevant to the investigation into Russian election interference.

The Trump White House Is A Place Where Turmoil Never Ends

By Dan Balz

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

President Trump promised many things as a candidate in 2016. He would drain the swamp. He would appoint only the best people. He would be a dealmaker par excellence. After 13 months in office, he has yet to truly make good on those pledges.

The president said that his business skills and outsider status would allow him to make the changes he argued that the nation's capital needed — and that many of his supporters saw as necessary. His tenure has underscored that running a business, especially a family business, is far different from running a government.

Trump's personnel instincts have been faulty or deliberately designed to generate instability. His word as a dealmaker has not always been reliable. His relationships with his own Cabinet members have been fraught — playing out again Wednesday with a sharp jab at Attorney General Jeff Sessions. His tweets may be the least of the problems that have afflicted his management of the government.

For Republicans, the disorder has been a source of constant distraction and worry, though the president has proved more agreeable to advancing conservative policies than some of them might have imagined. That he has been more conventionally conservative than his campaign suggested has kept them from rebelling — that and the fact that he has bent the party to his will and enjoys strong support among the GOP base.

Trump's learning curve has been steep, and it still exists. Mistakes began in the weeks after his election with personnel decisions during the transition that have haunted his presidency ever since. He stacked the White House in a way that guaranteed constant tension. He brought others into his administration who have proved to be ethically challenged. Infighting and volatility have been defining features of the presidency to date.

The announced resignation Wednesday of White House communications director Hope Hicks, stunning as it was, hardly qualifies as out of the ordinary in an administration in which chaos is a constant. And yet her departure seems more significant than some others. She was one of the president's closest confidants and most trusted advisers, a political novice who nonetheless had earned his trust. Hicks's resignation came the day after she spent hours testifying on Capitol Hill about Russian interference in the 2016 election, though there was no indication that the two are related.

Her departure comes instead at a time of new turmoil in the White House. She is the kind of stalwart who might have been expected to stay through a full term or even beyond.

With her gone, the president will be surrounded by only a few genuine loyalists outside of his family. And the controversies surrounding son-in-law Jared Kushner, who just lost his top-secret clearance, leave him in a weakened position to do the jobs he was assigned.

The upheaval is without precedent in a modern White House, and there is no assurance that it is over. In just a year, the upper-level team that came in with the president has been shredded.

Among top-level appointees, Trump has now turned over a chief of staff, a chief strategist, two deputy chiefs of staff, a national security adviser, two deputy national security advisers, a staff secretary, a longtime personal aide and a deputy assistant to the president who was a foreign policy adviser. He also fired an FBI director and an acting attorney general and saw a Cabinet officer resign in scandal.

The wreckage has been especially notable in the communications operation. Five people who were tapped for the job or have held the title of communications director have come and gone. Two others with communications responsibilities in other White House offices have or are departing. When the president is the chief and most unpredictable communicator in the White House, the role of communications director has become the most unrewarding job in the White House.

That's not to say the president hasn't had successes or made progress in changing the course of policy in the aftermath of the administration of President Barack Obama. He signed a huge tax cut. The economy is in good shape, unemployment is at a low level, and the stock market, despite some recent downs and ups, is well above what it was when he came into office.

He has changed the enforcement of immigration laws, as he promised during the campaign. He has softened or reduced regulations on businesses. He has facilitated a conservative shift in the makeup of the federal judiciary. He has pulled the United States out of the Paris climate agreement and sought to shift U.S. trade policy away from the free-trade consensus of past administrations.

Those changes cannot be underestimated, and to the degree that he has been stymied or unsuccessful elsewhere, many of his supporters blame the Democrats, congressional Republicans or the federal bureaucracy, a.k.a. the deep state. The core of his support remains intact, and he is the most popular person in his party by a mile.

But the roller-coaster ride he has led continues to take a toll. Beyond the changes in personnel, he has been a frustrating and perhaps frustrated dealmaker. He was not able to find a formula with congressional Republicans to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act and remains bitter at Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) for sinking a Senate bill that was on the brink of passage.

He moved toward Democrats on a deal to protect the dreamers, proposing a path to citizenship for 1.8 million young undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children. He appeared interested in a bipartisan plan put together in the Senate until his advisers reeled him back from the brink of a deal they thought was unwise. Eventually all proposed compromises collapsed, leaving Senate Democrats and the administration pointing fingers at each other as responsible.

Now he is engaged in the issue of guns and school safety in the aftermath of the Florida school shooting that left 17 people dead. On Wednesday, he shocked Democrats and Republicans alike by asserting that he will consider raising the age limit for purchasing a long gun from 18 to 21, among other changes he supports.

This is potentially a Nixon-goes-to-China issue for the president, who has said it's sometimes necessary to take on the National Rifle Association. But an NRA spokeswoman said over the weekend that there is no daylight between the organization and the president. No one is certain what his effectiveness will be in striking a deal. Stay tuned on this one.

Hanging over all this remains the Russia investigation headed by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III. The president remains unhappy, as his blast at Sessions underscored on Wednesday. Where this is heading and whether others are in legal jeopardy remains unclear to all except Mueller and his team. But the investigation adds something especially unsettling to the atmosphere of a White House that has been reeling from the start, under the leadership of a president who seems to thrive on it.

More Than 30 Trump Aides Lose Top Secret Clearance, Sources Say

By Margaret Talev Jennifer Jacobs

Bloomberg News, February 28, 2018

More than 30 aides to President Donald Trump have been stripped of access to top secret intelligence, two people familiar with the move said.

The officials have been notified that they will be downgraded to lower-level "secret" interim security clearances, said the two people. None of the officials have been asked to leave the administration and their portfolios on top secret matters will be distributed to other staff members, they said.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, also has had his security clearance downgraded as result of the same new policy on interim clearances set by White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, said another person familiar with the material.

All of the officials whose clearances were downgraded held the top secret designation on an interim basis. Kelly set a new policy that took effect last week that permits interim

clearances only at the secret level and not permitting temporary clearances at higher levels.

The White House has faced a barrage of criticism over its handling of sensitive intelligence. The House Oversight Committee opened an investigation this month after former Staff Secretary Rob Porter was permitted to keep his for months after the FBI said it had provided the White House a report including allegations of domestic violence from his two ex-wives.

Senate Judiciary Chairman Chuck Grassley said Tuesday that he wants answers from the White House and the FBI about reports that dozens of top officials still lacked a full security clearance, and that some officials like Kushner have access to the highly classified President's Daily Brief prepared by intelligence agencies.

In an earlier memo released Feb. 16, Kelly said that the administration must "do better" in its handling of security clearances. Kelly said he would discontinue all "Top Secret or SCI-level interim clearances" for people who have ongoing investigations stretching back to June 1, 2017, using an acronym for "Sensitive Compartmented Information." While the new policy was set to take effect on Feb. 23, White House officials have declined to say who would be affected.

VA Secretary David Shulkin's Top PR Aide Asked Congress To Help Get Him Fired

By Donovan Slack

USA Today, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — One of the top deputies to VA Secretary David Shulkin has actively lobbied Capitol Hill to demand his boss's resignation, according to two people with knowledge of the effort.

John Ulyot, the VA's assistant secretary for public affairs, asked a senior aide at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs to persuade lawmakers to call the White House and say they wanted Shulkin out, said both individuals, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the situation.

The move was unsuccessful — but audacious since Ulyot is the secretary's highest ranking aide tasked with publicly defending him and the agency. It is also the most striking evidence to date that some of Shulkin's own staff are trying to oust him.

Ulyot denies it happened. But the two sources said he made the request in a call initiated by VA Press Secretary Curt Cashour on Feb. 15, the day after the release of an inspector general's report that concluded Shulkin had misused taxpayer dollars during a European trip last year.

Shulkin had appeared at a congressional hearing that morning and raised the possibility that an aide's email account had been hacked. The inspector general had concluded the aide had doctored an email to get improper

approval for Shulkin's wife to join him on the trip at taxpayers' expense.

On the call, Cashour criticized Shulkin for raising concerns about hacking and told the senior aide that it would reflect poorly on the agency. He then put his supervisor, Ulyot, on the line, who asked the aide for help in an effort to oust Shulkin.

Cashour and Ulyot, who declined to be interviewed, provided a joint statement acknowledging they made the call but denying they sought help to push Shulkin out. "That simply never happened, and the allegation is ridiculous," the statement said.

The two people with knowledge of the effort said Ulyot expressed confidence on the call that President Trump would fire Shulkin by the following Tuesday. But he told the aide it would be helpful if lawmakers on the committee called for his resignation and contacted the White House to create more pressure and ensure the president followed through. And he said such pressure would make the firing a virtual certainty, the government sources said.

Cashour and Ulyot maintained the purpose of the call was to inform the aide that "we had no evidence of email hacking."

"Our message was simple: be careful on advancing the hacking allegations publicly, as they were thus far baseless," Cashour and Ulyot said in their statement. "The purpose of the call was to protect the secretary, the department and members of the committee from continuing to give credence to allegations that may later be disproven."

Cashour previously worked as press secretary for the House veterans' committee from 2013 until January this year. He became VA press secretary in June.

Ulyot worked on Trump's campaign and his transition team before becoming assistant VA secretary for public and intergovernmental affairs in April.

A power struggle between a group of political appointees and Shulkin and his longtime aides at the agency has divided the top ranks of the VA for months. But it spilled into public view following the release of the investigation report, when Shulkin told reporters the political appointees were undermining him.

The VA inspector general concluded in the report that Shulkin improperly accepted Wimbledon tickets and airfare for his wife at taxpayer expense, he spent nearly half the 10-day trip to Denmark and London last year sightseeing and he used an aide on official time to plan the leisure activities.

Shulkin first blasted the findings as unfair and inaccurate, but then expressed regret and agreed to repay the cost of the airfare and tennis tickets.

He told USA TODAY on Monday that he has the backing of the White House and planned to rid the agency of staffers who are not committed to supporting him and his agenda.

"I am committed to getting us back on track, and the only way I know how to get us back on track is to make sure there is only one agenda in this organization, and that's to serve veterans," he said. "And anybody who is trying to distract from that, I have to make sure that they understand that we're not going to have tolerance for that."

Shulkin could not be reached for comment Wednesday on this story.

The chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., appears firm in his support of Shulkin continuing in his post.

"I know there was a lot of drama last week in Washington," he told attendees at an American Legion conference in Washington Tuesday. "Secretary Shulkin has done a phenomenal job, and I want to tell you all that I will walk hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm to get the work done that we need to."

Top Aide To VA Chief Shulkin Is Said To Have Advocated His Ouster

By Lisa Rein

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

A senior aide to Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin lobbied an influential Capitol Hill staffer in mid-February in hopes that House Republicans would demand the VA chief's resignation and that of his deputy, according to three people with knowledge of the matter.

The alleged effort by John Ullyot, VA's assistant secretary for public and intergovernmental affairs, was promptly rebuffed by Jonathan Towers, staff director for House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.), these people say. They spoke on the condition of anonymity to offer candid insights about the power struggle that has roiled VA and embarrassed the Trump White House.

Towers, who declined to comment, told Ullyot that he had no intention of starting a campaign to oust Shulkin or Thomas Bowman, VA's deputy secretary and a former senior staffer on Capitol Hill, people familiar with his reaction said. Additionally, "Chairman Roe has said both publicly and privately, on multiple occasions, that the secretary and deputy secretary have his full support," committee spokeswoman Tiffany McGuffee Haverly said in a written statement issued Wednesday.

Towers is a longtime congressional staffer who has served on the House and Senate veterans affairs panels. Ullyot, a former Senate aide who held a prominent communications job in the Trump campaign, was joined on the phone call with Towers by VA's press secretary, Curt Cashour, another Trump appointee. The conversation occurred days after the agency's inspector general issued a report saying Shulkin misused taxpayer funds during a trip to Europe.

In a joint statement, Ullyot and Cashour denied the characterization of their call with Towers, saying, "That simply never happened, and the allegation is ridiculous."

The phone call was first reported by USA Today. Its disclosure coincides with the release of a related review by VA's inspector general into Shulkin's claim that his former chief of staff, Vivieca Wright Simpson, was the victim of an email breach.

In his report detailing Shulkin's European travel, VA Inspector General Michael J. Missal accused Wright Simpson of doctoring an email during the trip's preparations to ensure that the secretary's wife would be approved to accompany him at taxpayer expense. Shulkin has insisted he did nothing improper, calling attention to efforts among other political appointees within the agency to undermine him.

Wright Simpson retired in the aftermath of Missal's initial report on the Europe trip. Missal's subsequent investigation concluded that her email was not hacked but rather targeted by an "unsophisticated 'spoofing' of her identity" that was unrelated to planning for the Europe trip. It's unclear who may have sought to impersonate her.

The report said Wright Simpson showed Shulkin an email sent Feb. 14, the day the inspector general's initial investigation was released, to an employee in VA's finance department. It sought payment for a purchase. The email was marked "external" and was sent from a Comcast.net address.

Missal wrote that Shulkin, in an interview with investigators, said he "did not mean to imply" that Wright Simpson's email had been "hacked." The secretary told reporters this week that he misunderstood the spoofing incident and had said incorrectly that Wright Simpson's email was targeted by hackers.

Missal's report says VA's information technology staff has identified a type of phishing attack in which someone outside the agency impersonates an agency employee to persuade other employees to reveal private information and obtain fraudulent payments.

In their statement, Ullyot and Cashour said their call to Towers was to convey that "we had no evidence of email hacking, contrary to media reports and claims from a member of the committee."

"Our message was simple: be careful on advancing the hacking allegations publicly, as they were thus far baseless — a fact confirmed officially . . . by VA's inspector general," the statement said.

Ullyot and Shulkin have had a fraught relationship that has broken down in recent months, allies of both men say.

After The Washington Post made inquiries about the Europe trip last fall, VA issued a statement that said all of the secretary's activities were reviewed by ethics officials, a claim that proved untrue.

Ullyot told investigators that Shulkin had dictated the language in the response to The Post, the inspector general

report said. But Shulkin told them he had "no idea" where the statement originated.

Gowdy Seeks Answers On Allegations Of Excessive Spending, Retaliation At HUD

By Cristiano Lima

Politico, February 28, 2018

Rep. Trey Gowdy, the chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, on Wednesday requested that Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson turn over all documents and communications pertaining to allegations by a high-ranking civil servant that she was the target of reprisals after sounding the alarm on agency spending.

"To help the Committee determine whether HUD adhered to the applicable spending limitations while redecorating your office, please provide... [a]ll documents and communications referring or relating to redecorating, furnishing, or equipping your office since January 1, 2017," Gowdy, a South Carolina Republican, wrote to Carson, according to excerpts of the letter released Wednesday.

The chairman added: "In addition, please arrange to brief the Committee on this matter after producing the requested documents and information."

HUD official Helen Foster, in a sworn complaint to the Office of Special Counsel, raised concerns over spending at the department, including Carson's plans for redecorating.

According to Foster's lawyers, she was demoted without warning or explanation in July 2017, less than a year after being promoted to the role of chief administrative officer. In her position, Foster oversaw spending and office space at HUD.

In January 2017, Foster's legal team says, she was instructed to "find money" for redecorating after Carson's wife sought funds to purchase furniture. The amount was said to have exceeded the \$5,000 legal limit, prompting Foster to voice her objection.

Craig Clemmensen, the designated acting secretary at the time, replied that the \$5,000 "will not even buy a decent chair," according to the complaint.

Foster also expressed concerns over the more than \$10 million departmental shortfalls that took place under her predecessor at HUD.

Department officials reportedly also spent \$31,000 on a new dining set for Carson's office in late 2017.

Ryan Zinke's Special Assistant Resigns Over Anti-Muslim Views Shared On Social Media

By John Siciliano

Washington Examiner, February 28, 2018

A special assistant to Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke resigned on Wednesday after a media report showed several

instances when she made inflammatory comments on social media.

Christine Bauserman resigned after a CNN KFile review showed that she posted remarks on Facebook and Twitter that espoused conspiracy theories, anti-Muslim and anti-LGBT views.

"The positions expressed by Ms. Bauserman are inappropriate and unacceptable, and they are not consistent with those of the secretary or the Trump administration. The department has accepted Ms. Bauserman's letter of resignation," said Interior spokeswoman Heather Swift in a statement to CNN.

Bauserman's access to her Facebook and Twitter accounts has been restricted.

KFile showed that on Saturday she retweeted a picture of former President Barack Obama with text that read: "IN 8 YRS I IMPROVED LIFE FOR MILLIONS OF ILLEGAL ALIENS, EVERY MUSLIM TERRORIST GROUP & BASICALLY EVERYONE I COULD EXCEPT THE ONE COUNTRY I WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR."

Interior Department Forces Out Assistant Who Frequently Shared Falsehoods About Obama, Clinton And Minorities

By Darryl Fears

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

An Interior Department special assistant resigned Wednesday after a search of her social media accounts revealed that she routinely shared conspiracy theories, false statements and racially tinged comments about Muslims and African Americans.

Christine Bauserman, who worked in the office of the assistant secretary for lands and minerals and often attended policy briefings with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, quit immediately after her social media activity was revealed by CNN. In her role, she attended at least nine meetings with the secretary in September alone.

"The positions expressed by Ms. Bauserman are inappropriate and unacceptable, and they are not consistent with those of the Secretary or the Trump Administration," an Interior spokeswoman said in a statement. "The department has accepted Ms. Bauserman's letter of resignation."

Bauserman worked as the Arizona regional field director for President Trump's campaign from February 2016 until the end of the state's primary, according to her LinkedIn profile. Before that she was an information technology specialist and a political consultant.

She was among the first workers on Trump's transition team. CNN reported that Bauserman shared a falsehood that attacked former president Barack Obama as recently as this past weekend. Over several years, she shared posts

questioning his citizenship, "and in one comment called him 'a black man from the black panther movement.'

Another post supported unsealing the former president's college and birth records. Other posts Bauserman shared included a false story claiming that a doctor who "exposed Clinton Foundation corruption in Haiti" was found dead. Muslims and gays were also maligned in posts.

In mid-February, Bauserman shared an image in which a black man with his pants hanging low was placed next to an image of a Confederate statue. "How does a statue being in the same place for 100 years suddenly become offensive and men walking around in public with there a- showing not offensive," a caption said.

Treasury Unveils Tax Cut Calculator To Verify Withholding

By Sahil Kapur

[Bloomberg News](#), February 28, 2018

The U.S. Treasury Department unveiled an online calculator Wednesday to help Americans determine whether the amount of federal taxes being withheld from their pay is accurate under a new tax law.

The tax overhaul, passed by congressional Republicans in December, is estimated to boost after-tax incomes for most Americans in the initial years. Treasury said the changes would begin showing up in paychecks this month.

"Treasury estimates that the vast majority of employees in America will experience pay raises" as a result of lower tax bills for companies they work for, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said at a news conference.

The calculator became available Wednesday at [irs.gov](#), the website of the Internal Revenue Service. Acting IRS Commissioner David Kautter said the two groups of Americans he most recommends use the calculator are people with high itemized deductions, so they can understand which of their tax breaks have changed, and two-earner couples, to ascertain whether they've been pushed into a different bracket under the new system.

Democrats have asked for more information about the withholding tables and how the calculations are made. The Treasury Department indicated in a letter that it's seeking to "help workers ensure they are not having too much or too little withholding taken out of their pay."

Republicans have emphasized the bonuses and raises that companies have awarded workers after enactment of the law, which cut the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 21 percent. The Senate Finance Committee's top Democrat, Ron Wyden of Oregon, said Wednesday that many companies are using their after-tax gains to buy back their shares on the stock market.

The full effects of the tax law for 2018 won't be felt by Americans until the April 2019 filing season.

The tax law lowered individual rates across the board while increasing the child tax credit and limiting some deductions and personal exemptions; those changes are set to expire after eight years. The law is projected to raise the deficit by about \$1.5 trillion over a decade.

POLITICO Analysis: At \$2.3 Trillion Cost, Trump Tax Cuts Leave Big Gap

By David Rogers

[Politico](#), February 28, 2018

Between new cost estimates and the White House's own budget numbers, the wheels are coming off Republican claims that President Donald Trump's tax cuts will pay for themselves by generating increased growth and government revenues over the next decade.

"Not only will this tax plan pay for itself but it will pay down debt," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin famously boasted last September. But his own department's analysts now peg the 10 year-cost at \$2.3 trillion given the administration's assumption that tax breaks for individuals and large estates will be extended past 2025.

POLITICO's own calculations, working entirely from data in the 2018 and 2019 budgets, indicates that the added revenues generated by the tax cuts themselves would fall substantially short of matching \$2.3 trillion.

For the years 2018-2027, the shortfall ranges from \$1 trillion to \$1.3 trillion. Going a year further out into the future and measuring for 2019-2028, the picture improves, but the shortfall still is between about \$700 billion to \$1.1 trillion.

Using the same approach, POLITICO found the administration can get to \$2.3 trillion by 2028 if the economy lives up to the assumed 3 percent average annual growth in the president's budget — a full .8 percent point increase over the White House's starting baseline.

But that's a gamble that rests on many moving pieces other than the tax cuts — such as now finding the resources for big infrastructure projects. Most important, perhaps, it means that even if successful, all the valuable economic growth will go to pay for the tax cuts — and not reduce the deficit.

"Their argument was you need to get growth up to help deal with the deficit," said Jason Furman, who now teaches at Harvard after serving as a top economic adviser to President Barack Obama. "It turns out everything they are doing for growth isn't going to help the deficit at all. It's just going to repay the cost of the tax cuts."

In testimony before Congress, Mnuchin has remained upbeat. But despite the secretary's promises of transparency, his press office has rejected repeated requests from

POLITICO for more guidance and detail regarding the work done by Treasury's Office of Tax Analysis.

Indeed the OTA numbers — the most complete to date from the administration — only became public when Mick Mulvaney, director of the Office of Management and Budget, referenced them at the tail end of a House Budget Committee hearing on Feb. 14.

Mulvaney was being pressed at the time by the committee's ranking Democrat, Rep. John Yarmuth of Kentucky, to explain the dramatic drop in government receipts in his new fiscal 2019 budget when matched against what the administration forecast last May.

That drop is exaggerated by the fact that OMB chose last year to claim substantial growth based on the president's economic agenda but then assumed a "deficit neutral" tax bill. Yarmuth framed his question to focus on the 10 fiscal years where the two budgets overlap: 2018-2027. Mulvaney responded by citing what he said were Treasury estimates that the tax bill would cost \$1.8 trillion — accounting for a big part of the drop.

But the OMB director's answer inadvertently added to the confusion since it turns out he was quoting numbers for the years 2019-2028 which applied more directly to his new budget. A review of the scores from a compilation of administration sources clarifies the picture. The 10-year cost of the initial bill passed in December is in fact higher: \$2 trillion for 2018-2027. For the years, 2019-2028, the cost drops to about \$1.8 trillion — the number Mulvaney used.

The differences are largely explained by simple math. The costs of the corporate tax cuts are smaller in the out years as some business breaks are schedule to be phased down. And the costs of the tax cuts for this current year, about \$174 billion, drop out of the new budget window which begins in 2019.

The good news, for anyone confused, is that once the extensions are factored in these discrepancies fade. The 10-year cost in both cases evens out around \$2.3 trillion.

As explained by Mulvaney in his House testimony, one reason the Treasury numbers are higher is the department's analysts took a dim view of one of the health care-related offsets which the Congressional Budget Office accepted. This was not entirely a surprise since CBO has seemed conflicted itself about the merits of those savings. But in the final deliberations, Republicans badly needed the offset to expedite passage.

Elsewhere the costs attributed to the business and individual tax breaks in the bill appear not so far removed from prior estimates by the Joint Committee on Taxation. In fact, one irony of the situation is that when the increased revenues — as calculated by POLITICO — are applied against the \$2.3 trillion cost for 2018-2027, the net "macro" score is quite close to the \$1 trillion estimate JCT predicted in December.

The JCT score was dismissed by the White House at the time. But many in the administration would argue that even then it was never their expectation that the tax cuts alone would pay for themselves.

Instead, that burden has always rested on the president's larger economic agenda, officials say, especially deregulation and future infrastructure investments which will be needed to pick up the slack when the stimulus impact of the tax cuts begins to weaken.

"It has never been the administration's position that the tax cuts would pay for themselves," said a senior OMB official. "Our position has always been that the president's economic program taken as a whole — the additional growth that would be generated from dereg[ulation], from infrastructure, etcetera, taken as the whole set of policies — will more than offset the cost of the tax cuts."

Nonetheless it's not an easy matter to break out the relative weight of these different elements.

"It's explained fully in Chapter 8," said a White House press aide, sending POLITICO off to read that portion of last week's annual Economic Report of the President, prepared by the Council of Economic Advisers. But those pages do more to explain the rationale behind different pieces of the agenda than to specify their mathematical contribution to the .8 percent increase in growth assumed by the budgets.

To try to get some answers, POLITICO worked backwards beginning with each budget's estimate of how much deficit reduction can be attributed to the growth generated by the president's agenda.

Last May OMB assumed \$2.060 trillion in deficit reduction for the years 2018-2027. For the same 10 years in the new 2019 budget, only \$628 billion in deficit reduction is claimed.

As explained by the White House, the change simply comes from the fact that administration has now pocketed some of its agenda — like the tax cuts and early deregulation changes — and then baked them into the 2019 budget's baseline.

"They become part of the baseline instead of the 'policy' forecast," said a White House spokesperson for the CEA. "If tax reform passed and therefore became part of the baseline rather than policy forecast, then the policy forecast would change — even if the Administration's belief about the effects of a given economic policy priority remain unchanged."

Following this explanation, the difference between the two year's estimates should give some clue then of how much the tax cuts represent as a catalyst for growth.

Based on OMB's tables, the \$2.060 trillion in 2018's budget corresponds with .66 of a percentage in added growth; the \$628 billion in 2019 translates to .25 of a point. So the difference between the two — .41 of a point — is one measure for what the administration believes the tax cuts add.

Alternatively, the .25 can be subtracted from the full .8 percentages point of added growth assumed by the White House. The end result — .55 of a point — is an upper marker so to speak.

In making its calculations, POLITICO used both to provide some range for its estimates. From subsequent discussions with administration officials, this spread is not far from what the so-called Troika of OMB, CEA and Treasury actually agreed upon in coming up with the .8 percentage point increase.

But again based on OMB's tables, all fell short of yielding enough added revenues to reach the \$2.3 trillion target.

Spreadsheets At Dawn: The New Tax Battle Is All About Data

By Jim Tankersley

New York Times, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — The new Republican tax cut is providing a powerful weapon for the law's supporters and detractors, as well as investors and analysts, who are mining data on how companies are spending their windfalls in a battle to sway the behavior of voters and executives alike.

In the two months since President Trump signed the \$1.5 trillion tax bill into law, a vast arsenal of spreadsheets has begun to capture, in real time, the effect of the tax cut as it works its way through corporate balance sheets. Traders are compiling data to find value in a volatile stock market. Advocates of corporate responsibility are hoping to shame companies into passing more of their savings on to employees or charities. Partisans are using it to sway public opinion.

None of the data, as of yet, yield anywhere close to a full picture of how the tax cuts are flowing through corporate boardrooms and into the American economy. But that has not stopped politicians and organizations from using it to advance their goals.

After Congress approved the final version of the tax cut bill, John Kartch, of the conservative-leaning Americans for Tax Reform, started a list that began with AT&T, Comcast and five other companies that had announced wage increases or worker bonuses and credited the moves to the tax cuts. It has since grown to more than 400 companies and emerged as Republicans' favorite talking point for their new law.

Democrats have been building their own list, of companies announcing stock buybacks, and have showcased that as evidence the bill is benefiting the rich rather than trickling down to workers. Wall Street analysts have since released even more detailed estimates of how companies are responding to the law, which lowered taxes for corporations and so-called pass-through businesses. On

Wednesday, the nonprofit research group Just Capital will release one of the most detailed accountings to date: a ranking of companies on how much of their tax windfalls are going to workers, customers, communities and shareholders.

Advocates are hoping that the more information they can bring to the surface, the more they can bend companies' or voters' behavior with it.

"What we want to create is sort of a living thing that puts companies on notice," said Martin Whittaker, chief executive of Just Capital, a nonpartisan group that has compiled data on how 90 public corporations plan to spend their tax savings, and which will send letters to 875 companies on Wednesday seeking more information on those plans. Its initial release includes breakdowns of how individual companies will allocate their tax savings, based on their public statements and disclosures.

Paul Tudor Jones, a hedge fund titan who is a co-founder of Just Capital, said he hopes publication of that data will lead to a dialogue among executives and the general public "about what's the most equitable way to distribute this windfall we just received." By the middle of the year, he added, the group should have enough information from public disclosures and survey responses to get a fuller understanding of where the money is actually headed. "We'll learn a lot," he said.

The group's initial findings suggest shareholders of 90 large corporations — including Home Depot, Pfizer and Capital One — are reaping far more of the benefits of the law than workers or consumers. Pay or benefit increases for workers account for 6 percent of the savings those companies report from the law, the group calculates, while job creation accounts for 22 percent. More than half of the money going directly to workers takes the form of one-time bonuses, as opposed to permanent raises or benefits.

Those bonus announcements have dominated headlines, though, in part because of the tireless compilation work of Mr. Kartch, the vice president for communications at Americans for Tax Reform. "Nobody was expecting those announcements," Mr. Kartch said; Republicans had largely argued that corporate rate cuts would unleash business investment, which would raise productivity and, with it, worker pay.

When companies began announcing them in late December, after the bill had passed but before Mr. Trump had signed it, Mr. Kartch sent an email to staff members and affiliates of his organization, asking them to flag "any statements you see from companies raising wages/paying bonuses/hiring due to the tax bill." He said he would keep a running list and include smaller businesses that "would otherwise be overlooked by national media."

Other conservatives, including Republican leaders in Congress, followed suit, but Mr. Kartch's crowdsourced list seemed to catch the most fire. Mr. Trump tweeted an article

about it after it reached 100 companies. The influential Drudge Report linked to it for a day on its home page. Tips poured in, about bosses passing out bonus checks in break rooms or posting about them on company bulletin boards. A 19-year-old fan of the law emails Mr. Kartch frequently with any bonus news he can find. Conservatives credit the stream of bonus news, in part, for the bill's improving poll numbers.

"It will get more detailed with time," Mr. Kartch said, "but for now, it's all the raw material up there for anybody who wants it."

Bonus and wage announcements are only one slice of the law's impact. In early December, researchers in the office of Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the minority leader, began tracking another slice: the surge in stock buybacks that has accompanied the law. The team scours earnings calls, Google and social media for buyback announcements, and frequently blasts the results out to reporters. Mr. Schumer has taken to denouncing the buyback increases regularly on the Senate floor.

Outside groups are compiling a much broader array of data on what companies plan to do with their savings. Morgan Stanley has surveyed its stock analysts over their expectations of how companies they cover will spend their tax savings. Last week, its researchers released a 23-page report, counting appendixes, that contends stock traders may be overvaluing some companies by underestimating how much of their tax savings they will invest in workers and operations, as opposed to passing on to shareholders.

Just Capital is hoping to round out the picture further, by pushing companies that have not disclosed their tax windfall plans to answer 11 questions — including spelling out how much of the savings they will put toward raising workers' compensation, lowering consumer prices and minimizing environmental impact. Mr. Jones said the group would follow up weekly, as necessary, with phone calls and other attempts to collect the information.

"My attitude is," he said, "we're going to get the data one way or another."

White House Sends Congress Framework For Prison Reform

By Charles Fain Lehman

Washington Free Beacon, February 28, 2018

The White House announced Tuesday that it had sent Congress a framework for overhauling prison and criminal reentry in America, following up on a promise first issued by President Donald Trump in his State of the Union address late last month.

While stressing the importance of reducing crime and enhancing public safety, the White House's framework is focused within those constraints on cutting recidivism and promoting better reentry. It called on Congress to reevaluate

current reentry programs, implement evidence-based reentry programs, enhance risk assessment tools, expand access to prison work, and consider public-private partnerships in incarceration.

Such priorities highlight America's elevated rates of recidivism. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 68 percent of state offenders are rearrested within three years and 77 percent are rearrested within five years. Three hundred thousand inmates released each year will return to prison within three years.

Prison reform has been a focus of the White House since last December, when Trump held a roundtable, which included pro-reform voices and two state governors, to discuss reentry and reducing recidivism. It then earned a mention in the State of the Union, with Trump promising to "embark on reforming our prisons, to help former inmates who have served their time get a second chance at life."

Conspicuously absent from the White House's actions is any move towards sentencing reform, which would affect the rates at which prisoners enter prison, rather than their experience when leaving it. A bill to implement both sentencing and prison reform recently cleared the Senate Judiciary Committee, over the objections of Attorney General Jeff Sessions and five of the committee's Republicans; it remains to be seen whether it will be allowed debate time on the floor of the Senate.

Although lacking a sentencing reform component, the White House's framework nonetheless met with the approval of advocates of overhauling the criminal justice system. David Barnes, policy director of pro-reform advocacy organization Generation Opportunity, emphasized that the administration's approach was, in his opinion, the right way forward on reform.

"The White House is taking a sensible approach to keeping our neighborhoods and communities safer while giving those who have served their time a second chance. Since the vast majority of inmates will eventually be released, it is in everyone's best interest to ensure that young Americans are better off after leaving prison than they were when they got in. We are pleased with the White House's leadership on this critical issue and look forward to working with this administration and Congress to make substantial reforms to our prison system," Barnes said.

Trump is expected to follow up the Tuesday announcement with the Wednesday signing of an executive order to elevate the Federal Interagency Reentry Council (FIRC) into the White House, from the Department of Justice where it currently exists.

The FIRC was initially established in 2011 as a focal point for interagency collaboration on the issue of reentry. Its reincorporation into the White House will be part of the administration's broader push on reentry.

President Trump, Congress Honor Preacher Billy Graham At Capitol

By Sean Rossman And Marilyn Icsman

USA Today, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump and congressional leaders praised Billy Graham as America's pastor during a private ceremony at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday as the preacher lay in honor.

Graham, an evangelical preacher who spoke to millions in his lifetime, died Feb. 21 at age 99. His casket was placed in the center of the Capitol Rotunda for the crowded morning ceremony attended by members of Congress, the Cabinet, the president and Vice President Pence. The Rotunda was opened for public viewing afterward.

Throughout the 30-minute ceremony, the president and first lady Melania Trump sat next to the Graham family.

The president called Graham an "ambassador for Christ," who changed America and the world. He recalled how his father, Fred Trump, was a fan and brought the family to see Graham speak at Yankee Stadium.

"It was something very special," the president said. "Americans came in droves to hear that great young preacher. Fred Trump was a big fan."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., touted Graham as a leading American religious figure.

"He ministered to all walks, from some of the greats whose statues line this very hall — Eisenhower, King, Ford and Reagan — to everyday citizens lining up to pay their respects," Ryan said. "His message never diminished. That love was so infectious, wasn't it? The man had such a gift for connecting with people."

Graham's wooden casket was carried into the packed but silent Rotunda by military pallbearers just after 11 a.m. It was placed on a wood catafalque, the same one used for Abraham Lincoln and others who have been honored at the Capitol.

Trump, McConnell and Ryan each gave brief speeches before laying a wreath next to Graham's casket.

McConnell said Graham "touched millions of hearts" and "was a success story for the ages." His fame, he said, never overcame him.

"Billy knew better than anyone that fame and an impressive Rolodex weren't the real standards of success," McConnell said. "His aim was simpler: sharing the good news with as many souls as he possibly could."

No member of the Graham family made a speech at the ceremony. Members of Congress, arranged in a line that snaked through the Rotunda, waited to greet the family after the ceremony.

"Having served our nation for decades," said Rep. Patrick McHenry, who represents Graham's hometown of

Montreat, N.C. "I can think of no more fitting honor than for Rev. Graham to return to Washington one final time to lie in honor in the Capitol's Rotunda."

Trump followed up his remarks with a tweet, urging "men and women like Billy Graham to spread a message of love and hope to every precious child of God."

Graham is the fourth person to lie in honor at the Capitol. The previous was civil rights icon Rosa Parks in 2005. U.S. Capitol Police officers Jacob Joseph and John Michael Gibson, both of whom were killed in the line of duty in 1998, also received the honor.

Private citizens lie in honor; military and elected officials lie in state. Twenty-six people, including 11 presidents, have lain in state. Congress also honored unknown soldiers of World War I, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Outside the Capitol, hundreds waited in line to view Graham's casket. Among them was Joan Fesmire, a Pennsylvania woman who rededicated her life to Jesus Christ after hearing Graham speak at Madison Square Garden when she was 15.

"I went to many crusades and always heard him on the radio," she said. "He spoke with such love and authority, and I loved how he influenced so many presidents, and he was such a great loving leader."

Others came to show their respect even if they weren't close followers. Maryann McFadden of Arlington, Va., said she never saw Graham preach, but his honesty set him apart from others.

"It was just easy for him to speak, and he was sincere," she said.

Joy Knuth, visiting from Alaska, said she never heard a full Graham sermon but still admired him.

"I really respect his ministry and all that he's done for our country and how he's been a personality around the world really standing strong for Jesus Christ," she said.

Graham's body was laid in repose at the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte on Monday and Tuesday. Former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton visited the library to honor Graham.

Gratitude for Graham: Why almost everyone wants to say thank you to the legendary Billy Graham

The Billy Graham Library will host the funeral Friday, and Trump will attend. Graham's five children will speak. About 2,300 invitations were sent out for the funeral.

Trump, Congress Pay Respects To Billy Graham As He Lies In Honor At The Capitol

By Ed O'Keefe

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

In a solemn ceremony, President Trump and congressional leaders paid tribute to the Rev. Billy Graham Wednesday at the U.S. Capitol, calling him "America's pastor"

who connected with millions worldwide as he preached with humility.

As the body of the evangelical leader lay in honor in the Rotunda, Trump and congressional leaders delivered brief speeches praising Graham and Congress's chaplains offered prayers. Lawmakers then filed past Graham's casket, pausing at times for prayer.

In a rare moment of public self-reflection, Trump recalled for the crowd the time that his own father took him to see Graham preach at Yankee Stadium in New York in 1957.

"My father said to me, 'Come on, son' — and, by the way, he said, 'Come on, mom. Let's go see Billy Graham at Yankee Stadium.' And it was something very special," he said. "But Americans came in droves to hear that great young preacher. Fred Trump was a big fan. Fred Trump was my father."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said, "The man we recognize today may well have shared the Gospel with more people, face-to-face, than anyone else in history."

"Billy Graham lifted up our nation, not because he occupied the spotlight so masterfully — but because he knew he wasn't the one who belonged in it," McConnell added. "He was just a happy instrument in the hands of his creator."

Like McConnell, House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) called Graham, "America's pastor."

"A man made great, not by who he was, but by who he served, with all of his heart and all of his soul and all of his mind," Ryan said.

With the late minister's family in attendance, Trump, the first lady, Vice President Pence and lawmakers stood silently as Graham's casket was placed on a raised box called a catafalque that was constructed by the Capitol's official architect. It is made of wood and draped in a black cloth.

Most of Trump's Cabinet attended the ceremony as did many — but not all — members of the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. The House recessed Tuesday evening in tribute to Graham, meaning many lawmakers likely left Washington instead of staying for the event. Some Senate hearings were underway elsewhere on Capitol Hill during the ceremony.

Among other guests, dozens of ambassadors attended the ceremony as did Kentucky Republican Gov. Matt Bevin and former Sen. Charles S. Robb (D-Va.) and his wife, Lynda Bird Johnson, whose father, former president Lyndon B. Johnson, laid in honor in January 1973.

From 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. the Rotunda will be open to the public to visit and pay respects. Visitors are asked to enter through the Capitol Visitors Center. Graham's body will remain in place overnight and leave the Capitol on Thursday morning.

The 99-year-old world-renowned evangelical leader died Feb. 21 at his home in Montreat, N.C. Private and national tributes have poured in for more than a week.

As his body was driven Saturday from Asheville, N.C., to Charlotte, the motorcade was greeted by thousands of admirers along the route, including many waving Bibles and U.S. flags. On Monday and Tuesday at his family library, thousands of people — including former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton — came to pay respects.

Graham will be buried Friday in a private family service in Charlotte, which Trump is scheduled to attend.

The honor in the Rotunda is exceedingly rare. The tradition began with Kentucky Sen. Henry Clay in 1852 and was held most recently for the late Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii) in 2012.

The remains of unknown soldiers from World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam War have been granted the honor, as have 10 U.S. presidents — from Abraham Lincoln to Gerald R. Ford. In 1998, Congress granted use of the Rotunda for two Capitol Police officers killed while on duty to "lie in honor."

Graham becomes just the fourth private citizen — after Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the planner of the District of Columbia; former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover; and civil rights activist Rosa Parks — to "lie in honor." He is the first member of the clergy to receive the tribute.

Michelle Boorstein contributed to this report.

Rev. Billy Graham Lies In Honor At U.S. Capitol For Day Of Remembrance

By Michael D. Shear

[New York Times](#), February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON — President Trump hailed the Rev. Billy Graham as "an ambassador for Christ" who helped lift up the American spirit, speaking during a memorial service in the Capitol Rotunda to honor the pastor following his death at 99 last week.

Politicians and other well-wishers began gathering at the United States Capitol Wednesday morning to pay tribute to Mr. Graham, whose body arrived for a daylong memorial ahead of his funeral in North Carolina on Friday.

President Trump laid a wreath at the coffin of Mr. Graham, whose global ministry included close relationships with presidents since Harry Truman. His legacy includes an outsize influence on the life of America by encouraging millions of evangelical Christians to be engaged in social and political activism.

"Today in the center of this great chamber lies legendary Billy Graham," Mr. Trump said in brief remarks, "an ambassador for Christ who reminded the world of the power of prayer and the gift of God's grace."

Mr. Trump added: "Today we say a prayer for our country, that all across this land, the Lord will raise up men and women like Billy Graham to spread a message of love and hope."

Cabinet officials, senators, House members and family members also gathered Wednesday morning to pay tribute. Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, called Mr. Graham "a happy instrument in the hands of his creator" and called on the nation to remember him.

"The secret of my work, he explained, is God," Mr. McConnell said of Mr. Graham. "I would be nothing without Him. That is what made Billy Graham America's pastor."

Speaker Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin said Mr. Graham repeatedly challenged the nation to look to God and to look within.

"In those moments, when we felt weak in spirit, when our country was on its knees, he reminded us, he convinced us that is exactly when we find our grace and our strength," Mr. Ryan said.

Mr. Graham joined an exclusive list of more than 30 Americans who have lain in state or in honor in the Rotunda, including lawmakers, presidents, civil rights activists, law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty, an F.B.I. director, military commanders and the remains of unidentified soldiers from several of the nation's wars.

He became only the fourth private citizen to lie in honor at the Capitol, the first since Rosa Parks did so in 2005.

Though he was a counselor to many presidents throughout many decades, as he preached to packed stadiums and people watching on television around the world, Mr. Graham later eschewed the mixing of politics and religion, saying that he had "crossed the line."

That sentiment has prompted some to question whether he would have agreed with the decision to have his coffin lie in honor in the Capitol, which perhaps could be viewed as a celebration of the crossing the line that he no longer believed appropriate at the end of his life.

Mr. Trump recalled attending a Billy Graham sermon at Yankee Stadium in New York, saying that his father, Fred Trump, was a fan of Mr. Graham's at the time.

"My father said to me, 'Come on, son,' and by the way he said, 'Come on, mom, let's go see Billy Graham at Yankee Stadium.' And it was something very special. But Americans came in droves to hear that great young preacher," the president said. "Fred Trump was a big fan. Fred Trump was my father."

Mr. Graham's coffin rests on a "catafalque," a wooden stand, which was constructed by the Architect of the Capitol for such ceremonies. Mr. Trump and congressional leaders are scheduled to make remarks and lay a wreath during the service. Members of the public will be allowed to file past the coffin starting later Wednesday.

Mr. Graham's coffin will remain in the Capitol Rotunda until Thursday.

Trump Prays For God To 'raise Up' Another Billy Graham Following The Evangelical Leader's Death

By Eugene Scott

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

Lawmakers and their staffs from both sides of the aisle filled the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol Wednesday morning to pay their respects to the late Rev. Billy Graham, widely viewed as the most influential pastor in American politics.

Graham drew wide acclaim by traveling the world and hosting crusades where he shared the teachings of Jesus Christ. In Washington, he was perhaps known as much for his loyalty to Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal and visiting George W. Bush the night the United States and its allies launched an air attack on Iraq, as he is for helping Lyndon B. Johnson pick his running mate and providing marriage counsel to Hillary Clinton in the midst of her husband's infidelity scandal.

It is in part because of these relationships that Graham became the first religious leader to lay in honor at the Capitol.

President Trump spoke at the ceremony Wednesday, noting Graham had preached to at least 200 million people globally.

While many know Graham for his presence in Washington, he actually spent significant time with people on the margins of society. Trump noted this when he said: "He took his message to the poorest places, to the downtrodden and to the brokenhearted, to inmates in prison and to the overlooked and neglected. He felt a great passion to those that were neglected."

Since Graham's death, quite a bit has been written critical of how poorly he engaged people of color during the Civil Rights movement, anti-Semitic statements made by him and his offensive remarks toward the LGBT community.

While several of the leaders now associated with the president, most notably Graham's son, Franklin, have taken on similar tasks, it is not unfair to say many Americans are more familiar with the evangelicals making the cable news circuit in support of Trump for their political allegiances than their humanitarian efforts.

At the memorial, Trump shared his hopes that another Billy Graham comes soon: "Today, we say a prayer for our country that all across this land the Lord will raise up men and women like Billy Graham to spread a message of love and hope to every precious child of God."

With polarization being at levels generally viewed as never seen before — even within Christianity, the question becomes: Will the current political climate allow for another evangelical leader to arise who is able to connect with both

sides of the aisle? Maybe as importantly, is Trump the one who can encourage that?

Trump praised Graham's lifelong influence in his own life starting when as a child, he attended one of the preacher's crusades at Yankee Stadium following an invitation to do so from his father.

"And it was something very special," he said. "Fred Trump was a big fan. Fred Trump was my father."

The younger Trump, however, appears to be more of a fan of evangelical leaders willing to attack his political opponents.

Mark Burns, a pastor running to replace Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.), made headlines for his highly partisan remarks and prayer at the 2016 Republican National Convention. He said:

Republicans, we got to be united because our enemy is not other Republicans — but is Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party.

Let's pray together. Father God, in the name of Jesus, Lord we're so thankful for the life of Donald Trump. We're thankful that you are guiding him, the you are giving him the words to unite this party, this country, that we together can defeat the liberal Democratic Party, to keep us divided and not united.

Franklin Graham, the chief executive of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, has previously claimed former president Barack Obama was a Muslim and used Easter Sunday to provoke birtherism rumors about Trump's predecessor. He spent 2016 touring America holding prayer rallies at state capitols before telling Fox News he believes "God's had" helped Trump be victorious in the 2016 race.

"[Americans wanted] somebody in the White House that believed in God, and would listen to God's voice," he said.

Robert Jeffress, a Dallas pastor who is on Trump's evangelical advisory committee, suggested that those who backed Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton in 2016 would be in the deepest parts of hell.

"Although my friend Juan (Williams) describes her as kind of St. Hillary of Chappaqua, she's hardly a bastion of virtue herself," he said on Fox News.

He had harsher words directed at Williams, a Fox News analyst: "If I am going to hell, Juan — like you say I am for supporting Donald Trump — then that means you're going to be a hundred floors below me for supporting Hillary Clinton."

With these types of characterizations coming from some of Trump's top faith advisers, Americans would not be wrong to question if Trump wants someone to actually continue Graham's desire to connect with both sides of the aisle.

Trump won the support of white evangelicals and white Catholics, but he continues to be the recipient of great criticism from Christians of color and more progressive Christians for his policies, his tone and his choice of words. In

theory, this could change if the president lent his ear to a faith leader who has consistently let bipartisanship be a guiding principle. It is not yet clear who that person could be. Until then, perhaps the most influential leader in the current political climate influencing the values of the electorate may be the president himself.

Graham Praised By Trump, Politicians As 'America's Pastor'

By Laurie Kellman

Associated Press, February 28, 2018

WASHINGTON (AP) — The president gently touched the bare wood of Billy Graham's casket. The speaker of the House bowed his head. And hundreds of other lawmakers, family and friends stood in a rare salute Wednesday to the man they called, "America's pastor."

"He ministered to all walks, from some of the greats whose statues line this hall — Eisenhower, King, Ford, and Reagan — to the everyday citizens lining up today to pay their respects," said House Speaker Paul Ryan, gesturing to Graham's casket under the eye of the Capitol Rotunda.

President Donald Trump, who met Graham but is closer to his son, Franklin, nonetheless recalled that the elder Graham had long been part of his life. Trump said his father, Fred, "said to me, 'Come on, son ... Let's go see Billy Graham at Yankee Stadium.' And it was something very special."

He called Graham "an ambassador for Christ who reminded the world of the power of prayer and the gift of God's grace."

Graham's influence stretched far beyond the city where he counseled presidents and lawmakers to a global flock over the better part of seven decades. He is known for having met every president, Trump included, and counseled most.

But he learned to be wary of the heat of politics. Close to Richard Nixon, Graham later said the details of the Watergate scandal made him feel used.

The Rev. Billy Graham received a rare tribute by the nation's political leaders under the Capitol Rotunda in Washington. The pine casket carrying Graham is lying in honor in the Rotunda on Wednesday. (Feb. 28)

But the world of American politics and government embraced Graham on Wednesday, a week after he died at age 99. Those gathered, including Vice President Mike Pence, some members of Trump's Cabinet and members of the House and Senate, stood around the casket. They were ringed by paintings of the nation's founders.

"The man we recognize today shared the Gospel with more people, face-to-face, than anyone else in history," said Sen. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

As the leaders stood by the casket, Trump reached out to touch it. Ryan, nearby, bowed his head.

Some 30 family members accompanied Graham's casket to Washington, where he had befriended presidents of both parties. Graham's son, Franklin, tweeted a photo Wednesday of family members loading the casket onto a jet emblazoned with "Samaritan's Purse," the name of a Christian relief charity that he chairs.

AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

Graham is lying in honor before a funeral Friday near his home in North Carolina. The Rotunda entrances were draped with black fabric, and Graham's casket rested on a black-draped catafalque beneath the soaring ceiling and its painting, the "Apotheosis of Washington."

Graham felt burned by Nixon for years. Nixon's White House tapes released in 2002 included Graham's voice telling the president that Jews "don't know how I really feel about what they're doing to this country." He apologized.

Nonetheless, he ministered to other presidents until his health began to fail.

Former President Bill Clinton recalled seeing one of Graham's crusades as a child, a profound experience that became more amazing over his life. Graham counseled him as Arkansas governor, and later as president in the White House itself.

"In that little room, he was the same person I saw when I was 11 on that football field," Clinton said Tuesday after viewing the casket at Graham's home.

Former President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, visited Graham's home earlier in the week.

In Washington, Ryan said there had been no doubt that Graham would receive the honor of a public viewing in the Rotunda. He told reporters that almost immediately upon hearing of Graham's death he, Trump, McConnell and Rep. Patrick McHenry, who represents the Graham family's district, agreed it would happen.

Trump met Graham at the pastor's 95th birthday party in 2013, but is closer to Franklin Graham Jr.

Graham shares the honor of a public viewing in the Rotunda with 11 presidents and other distinguished Americans, starting with Sen. Henry Clay of Kentucky in 1852 and, most recently, Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii in 2012.

AP Photo/Susan Walsh

Graham is only the fourth private person to lie in honor since 1998. The others are two U.S. Capitol Police officers who died in the line of duty in 1998 and civil rights hero Rosa Parks in 2005.

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Trump, Congressional Leaders Honor 'America's Pastor' Billy Graham In Capitol

By Josh Delk

The Hill, February 28, 2018

President Trump and leaders in Congress paid their respects to the late evangelist Billy Graham on Tuesday, as the famed preacher lies in the Capitol Rotunda in honor of his remarkable life.

Trump praised Graham as an "ambassador of Christ" and for his decades of ministry in America and across the globe, noting the millions who flocked to hear sermons from the man often referred to as "America's pastor."

"We can only imagine the number of lives touched by the preaching and the prayers" of the famed evangelist, the president said.

Graham, who prayed with and served as a spiritual adviser for 12 presidents, died at the age of 99 last week in his North Carolina home.

"He took his message to the poorest places, to the downtrodden and to the brokenhearted, to inmates in prison and to the overlooked and neglected. He felt a great passion to those that were neglected," Trump continued.

Graham is just the fourth person in U.S. history to lie in honor in the Capitol, a rare honor last given to civil rights icon Rosa Parks in 2005.

Trump and leaders from the House and Senate gave remarks in the rotunda before placing wreaths on Graham's casket. Vice President Pence along with members of Congress and the Graham family gathered in the Capitol just after 11 a.m.

"Here lies America's pastor," said House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) in his remarks. "The man had such a gift with connecting with people. When listening to Reverend Graham, it was like he was right there next to you."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) also praised Graham for his humility and persistence in sharing the Gospel message throughout his long career, which spanned more than 70 years.

"Billy Graham lifted up our nation, not because he occupied the spotlight so masterfully, but because he knew he wasn't the one who belonged in it," he said.

Trump will also attend Graham's funeral in the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, N.C., on Friday, along with over 2,300 other guests.

Billy Graham Becomes Fourth Civilian To Lie In Honor At U.S. Capitol

By Sally Persons

Washington Times, February 28, 2018

The Rev. Billy Graham became the fourth civilian to lie in honor at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday and was received by President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence and other lawmakers.

The Graham family was also in attendance as the casket was brought inside the rotunda. The convocation was delivered by House Chaplain the Rev. Patrick J. Conroy, S.J.

Mr. Trump and leaders on Capitol Hill, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan, also delivered remarks.

Known as "America's pastor," Mr. Graham's public addresses were broadcast nationwide from 1947 to 2005. Trying to stay nonpartisan, he served as a personal adviser to every U.S. president from Harry Truman to Barack Obama.

Mr. Trump spoke about his personal experience of seeing Mr. Graham at Yankee Stadium in 1957 with his parents.

"Americans came in droves to hear that great young preacher. Fred Trump was a big fan. Fred Trump was my father," Mr. Trump said.

He emphasized that Mr. Graham related most to those who were downtrodden and struggling, and that even in his global ministry, his focus was always America.

"Billy Graham carried his message around the world, but his heart, as Franklin will tell you, was always in America," he said referring to Mr. Graham's fourth son who has continued his father's ministry.

Mr. McConnell, Kentucky Republican, said humility is what made Mr. Graham stand apart from other preachers.

"Eventually, through his own strength and personal greatness, he founds a world changing ministry, leads historic revivals, and eventually lies here in honor in the United States Capitol while a grateful nation pays respects. A man made success story for the ages," Mr. McConnell said.

"His plainspoken preaching of essential truths without ego or embellishment. Billy Graham lifted up our nation. Not because he occupied the spotlight so masterfully, but because he knew he wasn't the one who belonged in it," he added.

Lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle gathered in the rotunda to pay their respects. Three wreaths, one each from the House, Senate and executive branch, were placed near the casket. The public ceremony was followed by a bicameral religious service.

"The man had such a gift for connecting with people," Mr. Ryan, Wisconsin Republican, said.

He said it was Mr. Graham who reminded Americans that the moments of great struggle are often where they find their strength.

"In moments when we felt weak in spirit, when our country was on its knees, he reminded us, he convinced us, that is exactly when we find our grace and our strength," Mr. Ryan said.

Being lain in honor is for private citizens while government or military officials are lain in state. Only three other civilians have received the privilege, including famed civil rights demonstrator Rosa Parks in 2005, and two Capitol

Police officers, Jacob Chestnut and John Gibson, who died in the line of duty when a gunman entered the Capitol in 1998, according to the Architect of the Capitol.

Billy Graham Is The First Religious Leader To Lie In Honor At The U.S. Capitol. Some Say He Should Be The Last.

By Michelle Boorstein

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

For seven hours Wednesday, the remains of the Rev. Billy Graham lay in honor at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda. Hundreds of people streamed past his coffin, many with tales of how the iconic pastor brought them closer to Jesus Christ.

The day began with a private, televised memorial at the Rotunda, the nation's three most powerful politicians — House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and President Trump — speaking of Graham's great gift to America: his evangelism.

The most remarkable thing about Graham, said McConnell, was not his cutting-edge, multimedia ministry or his counsel to presidents — it was the fact that Graham knew God, not he himself, was responsible for his success. "The secret of my work is God," he said. "Without him I would be nothing," McConnell quoted Graham as saying. "This is what made Billy Graham America's pastor."

While Graham was the first religious leader to lie in honor at the Rotunda — only three other private civilians have received that honor — this type of experience would feel familiar to him. He had already received some of the highest civic awards the U.S. government can bestow on a civilian: the Congressional Gold Medal (1996, with his wife, Ruth) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1983).

But Graham, who died Feb. 21 at age 99, was of a different era, a different America in which there was even roughly a shared idea of religion. Historians on Wednesday said the service was a striking example of how much the country has changed during Graham's long life, becoming a much more diverse and divided place. The idea of coming together to honor someone primarily for his or her religious faith now seems almost unfeasible. Some called Wednesday's ceremony a throwback.

"I don't think we'll ever see anything like this again," said John Fea, a historian of American religion at Messiah College. "Graham represented a kind of midcentury, post-World War II kind of consensus. He is the embodiment of when America was a mass culture. And we are — for good or bad — now fragmented. There is no religious figure who can command consensus the way he did."

[How an aging Billy Graham approached his own death]

In announcing Congress's invitation last week, Ryan said Graham had "spread the gospel in 185 countries during

his 99 years on Earth, touching the lives of many and forever changing the course of the world's spiritual health."

"Rev. Billy Graham was an American evangelist and minister, internationally known for his devout faith, inherent humility, and inclusive nature," reads a statement on Ryan's website announcing the event. Graham was on Gallup poll's list of "Top Ten Most Admired Men" 61 times — more than any other man since the list began in the 1940s.

[My grandfather Billy Graham was my hero]

Graham joined civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks and two Capitol Police officers killed while on duty to lie "in honor" at the Rotunda. The designation is different for presidents, statesmen and war heroes, who lay "in state." In total, 32 people have been granted the honor, starting with Henry Clay, the former House member and senator from Kentucky and secretary of state.

Barbara Perry, director of presidential studies at the Miller Center for presidential and political history at the University of Virginia, said she thinks honoring someone whose primary service was the conversion of people to a certain faith with a Rotunda ceremony violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Although Graham was an adviser to presidents, Perry noted, tapes came out later revealing Graham and President Richard M. Nixon sharing anti-Semitic views, and civil rights historians have noted that Graham urged the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and others not to press hard on the cause of racial equality.

"Not that he shouldn't be lauded, but does he deserve to lie in honor in the U.S. Capitol? And once you open that door, where do you stop?" Perry said. "Lying in honor should be someone who served their country. Well, how did he do that?"

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, a nonprofit organization that pushes for the separation of church and state, wrote a formal complaint letter to Ryan and McConnell. "The fact is that Graham lived his life in service to his evangelical Christian religion, and the Bible that he believed was an infallible reference manual. He placed the Bible far above the Constitution," the advocacy group wrote.

The advocacy group Americans United for the Separation of Church and State on Wednesday released a statement saying Graham should not have been a Rotunda honoree.

"We don't say this to criticize a man who has died, but because the question of who should receive this rare honor warrants public discussion. ... Such a high government honor for someone solely for their work spreading an interpretation of one faith offends the spirit of our First Amendment's guarantee that government will not take actions that endorse or promote religion," the statement read.

The office of the historian of the House of Representatives declined to give more information about the

criteria used to select Graham, or other past honorees. The Office of the Architect of the Capitol, which hosted the service, said only that such services are prompted by congressional resolution or by congressional leaders.

[A history of lying in state — Americans honored in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda]

At the private service Wednesday, Ryan, McConnell and Trump gave deeply religious tributes.

"Today we give thanks for this extraordinary life. And it is very fitting that we do so in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, where the memory of the American people is enshrined. Here in this room we are reminded that America is a nation sustained by prayer," Trump told the crowd. "Today we honor him as only three other previous private citizens have been. Like the faithful of Charlotte once did, we say a prayer that all across the land, the Lord will raise up men and women like Billy Graham to spread a message of love and hope to every precious child of God."

According to Pew Research data, about a half of Americans say they pray daily, while a quarter say they seldom or never pray. Trump's own belief about God and his prayer life are not clear, though he does not attend church regularly and has said he does not ask God for forgiveness — two basic tenets of traditional Christian practice. About one-fifth of Americans say they have no religious affiliation.

Historians and Graham experts said his life spanned a period when there was more of a shared concept of American "civil religion" — in other words, that being a pious person in and of itself had merit.

Graham's other high honors, said William Martin, senior fellow in religion at Rice University and author of the upcoming "A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story," came in part because "of just the fact that he was calling people to be Christian. To live lives as good citizens and of service." These were decades when the connection between those things seemed obvious to Americans — even if they unofficially agreed not to speak of things like racial segregation and gender inequality.

However, Martin said Graham was responsible for more than winning souls. He served as a kind of unofficial diplomat between the U.S. and foreign leaders, comforted soldiers in Korea and Vietnam, and "did more to enlarge the scope of religious freedom in Eastern Europe than perhaps any else."

The Wednesday service, Martin said, "to a significant extent shows the difference between then and now."

Historians also said while Graham typically delivered public prayers explicitly in the name of Jesus Christ, he became increasingly in his life more sensitive to the diversifying America. In contrast to his son, evangelist Franklin Graham, Billy Graham said decades ago that Muslims and Christians worshiped the same God, Martin said. Franklin Graham has called Islam "a very wicked and evil religion."

Wednesday shows how America includes radically different religious bubbles. While some considered the service shocking for such a diverse nation, the country's three most prominent political leaders chose to focus not on Graham's secular accomplishments but on his faith, known as a sincere and humble one.

"But remember the current leadership hasn't been remarkably hospitable to the changes" in America, Martin said.

Grant Wacker, author of "America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation," said that although the lawmakers in the Rotunda on Wednesday focused on Graham's religious faith, the late evangelist would have expanded on how that faith must lead people to confront societal problems.

Ryan praised Graham as "challenging us to look at the right questions."

"Although Ryan does not say so, part of Graham's lifelong mission was pressing people to look around at the crises on the international and national scenes and look within at the crises in their own lives, and ask what is wrong? In all cases what is ultimately wrong is sin, resulting in greed, cruelty, etc.," Wacker wrote to the Post.

Historians, clergy of all kinds and everyday Americans have been memorializing Graham in the days since he died, sharing stories about how his multimedia, racially integrated and nonpartisan crusades changed the face of American religion. Many have shared simple stories of how his humility and clear faith converted them. Others have debated what impact he could have had on issues such as racism and economic equality if he had made them his causes. Some say he would have bemoaned how partisan U.S. evangelicalism has become, while others argue that he planted the seeds.

As his body was driven Saturday from Asheville, N.C., to Charlotte, the motorcade was greeted by thousands of admirers along the route, including some waving Bibles and American flags.

Graham will be buried Friday in a private family service in Charlotte.

Fea said that although he normally "would be screaming" about the overlap in church and state, Graham may be an exception.

"There have been a lot of times when the wall between church and state had checkpoints. Graham was one of the most famous men of the 20th century, an American — I think this might be an example of a case where one of those checkpoints is there," Fea said. "Evangelical Christianity, whether you like it or not, has always been at center of the Republic, since the 18th century. It's only now they are learning to live without the cultural power, to be at the periphery — in the last 20 years. This is the guy who was the

embodiment of a major, major stream of American culture. Not just religion, but American culture."

For Many Republicans, Trump's Offshore Drilling Plan And Beaches Don't Mix

By Darryl Fears

Washington Post, February 27, 2018

COLUMBIA, S.C. — After waiting in the morning chill for other lawmakers to speak, state Rep. Nancy Mace finally took the microphone. She was the General Assembly's newest member, only four weeks on the job, "a baby among these folks," she told the crowd.

She was also a proud Republican in this very red state, the first woman to graduate from The Citadel military college, a former campaign worker for President Trump, a fiscal conservative who championed his tax overhaul — not the kind of politician demonstrators gathered at a rally organized by liberals were accustomed to hearing.

But the words she roared into the mic set off a round of whistling, shouting and fist pumps. Like several GOP legislators who joined Democrats in stirring the crowd, Mace broke sharply with the president over his plan to offer oil and gas companies leases to drill a few miles off beaches that bring \$20 billion in annual revenue to South Carolina and support 600,000 tourism jobs.

"Eight to 10 million tourists a year come down to Charleston. They don't want to come to see oil drilling off the coast," said Mace, who represents an area that includes the city. The former military cadet laid down a gauntlet: "Ain't gonna happen. Not on my watch!"

As the Interior Department hosts public "listening sessions" through early March to explain its proposed five-year lease plan — which would open 95 percent of the nation's outer continental shelf to potential drilling — a growing chorus of bipartisan opposition is finding its voice. At least a half-dozen similar rallies have taken place in other cities where sessions were held, including in New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Oregon and California.

Mace's defiance is an indication of how deep the opposition goes. Atlantic and Pacific coast governors, congressional delegations and attorneys general delivered the first waves of protests. Now state lawmakers, mayors and city councils are mobilizing in an attempt to stop the administration's plan.

From the front steps of South Carolina's capitol, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke was targeted by Republicans and Democrats alike for exempting Florida from the leasing plan less than a week after it was announced. Zinke said Florida was spared because its geology is different, although he offered no scientific studies to support his claim.

Sen. Chip Campsen (R) was outraged. "If Florida is unique, we're more unique," he said a few days after

speaking at the mid-February event. "We have the most beautiful and historic coastline on the East Coast."

Oil and gas representatives say energy development off that coast could provide the state \$2.7 billion in annual economic growth, 35,000 jobs and potentially lower costs for residents struggling to pay their heating bills.

But Campsen focused on what they fail to say: Oil and gas drilling could permanently scar the state's pristine coast. Refineries, chemical plants, sea-to-shore pipelines and storage tanks would be built and placed near and on beaches. Roads would be needed for a parade of diesel trucks to haul material away.

"We have a lot at stake, a lot to protect, a lot in danger," said Campsen, an avid outdoorsman whose district also overlaps Charleston. "People need to understand that if you are going to have offshore drilling, you have to industrialize a huge portion of your coast."

Along the Gulf Coast, oil and gas companies control leases on 14 million acres as part of a long history of drilling. And the country relied on the Gulf Coast for its gas reserves after the 1970s Arab oil embargo hobbled the U.S. economy.

The Atlantic coast, by contrast, developed a beach tourism economy. But when Congress decided to lift a 40-year ban on exporting American crude oil in 2015, the industry began searching for oil to put into the world market and increased its demand to drill in the Atlantic.

"We don't want it. We don't need unsightly oil rigs and the smelly pipelines sprawled across our beaches and coast," said Rep. Robert Brown (D), known to butt heads with Republicans who also represent parts of Charleston. "Why allow this dirty industry to devalue our most valuable property?"

The Trump administration's drilling plan came under fire minutes after it was announced in early January, and the fury only intensified when Zinke traveled to Florida, met with its GOP governor, Rick Scott, and assured him that the Sunshine State would be excluded.

Other governors along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts immediately demanded the same consideration, and their attorneys general sent a letter to Zinke asking him to back off the plan or, some warned, face lawsuits.

Zinke has been accused of favoring oil and gas interests over nearly everything else. Between February and November of last year, top Interior officials had nearly 180 meetings with industry representatives, according to an analysis of the department's visitor log by the nonprofit organization Friends of the Earth.

"You always know these meetings are happening, but the sheer volume was shocking," said Nicole Ghio, fossil fuels program manager for the group, which leans to the political left. It undertook the analysis, she said, because opposition to the drilling plan was so immediate, strong and bipartisan on

both coasts that Friends of the Earth wondered how the administration put it together.

The secretary's effort to justify the plan since its rollout is "striking," according to Ghio. "You look at the immediate exemption of Florida; it looks political," she said. "There's no legal rationale. Florida is important, but I say the same about California, my state."

The meetings at the Interior Department contrast with the listening sessions the department is holding in 23 cities in coastal states, from Boston, Trenton, N.J., and Tallahassee to Olympia, Wash., Salem, Ore., and Sacramento. The sessions are far different from the sometimes boisterous public hearings they replaced: After a video presentation about the drilling plan, anyone in attendance can log comments into a bank of computers.

The powerful emotions at Columbia's rally fizzled under the new format, which included experts from the department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management quietly answering questions one on one in a hotel meeting room. Only once did the volume rise, when a man with a bullhorn leaped on a chair. "Mic check!" yelled Drew Hudson, a local resident opposed to the drilling. "This process is a sham!"

Renee Orr, chief of the bureau's Office of Strategic Resources, said the new format is a better way to exchange ideas as opposed to the shouting and booing that often characterizes public hearings. But across the country, participants have disagreed, including a New Jersey protester who described the listening session as "dodging democracy."

But standing in a hallway outside the session, two of the Interior Department's supporters talked about the plan's pluses. Tim Page, executive director of the Consumer Energy Alliance, said drilling off the South Carolina coast could help "keep energy prices low for consumers so they won't have to choose between heat and groceries," he said.

Mark Harmon, the director of a state unit of the American Petroleum Institute, stressed a different point. "Ultimately it means the potential for jobs and reinvestment in the community," he said.

When the state's newest legislator took her fight against drilling to her Facebook page, Mace heard from one of the oil industry's powerful backers. And in a comment posted to the page, U.S. Rep. Jeff Duncan (R-S.C.) lit into her.

"I believe that if natural gas were discovered at distances over the visible horizon, in abundant recoverable resources, this conversation would be different," wrote Duncan, who favors seismic testing to determine how much oil and gas might lie off the state's coast. "But having a closed mind about offshore activities is shortsighted. Everyone likes their gasoline and natural gas supplying industries like Alcoa and Nucor Steel — as long as it is produced elsewhere."

Mace replied: "Thank you Congressman Jeff Duncan for offering your thoughts here. However, every municipality along the coast disagrees with you."

Indeed, South Carolina's opposition and support for drilling is largely a divide between people who live on the coast and those who don't. "It's easy for the upstate to support offshore drilling when it ain't in your back yard," Mace added in her reply. "Coastal communities ought to have input on this decision."

The comment thread on the Facebook page filled with remarks from people who said that she was out of step, that they didn't know she would take such a stand against a Republican agenda, that they would reconsider their support for her.

Mace shrugged them off. "I worked for President Trump . . . in several states. I support his agenda," she said. "But that doesn't mean like a blind sheep I will agree with everything. I represent the Charleston area."

U.S. Interior Panel Votes For Lower Federal Offshore Oil And Gas Royalties

Reuters, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Seeks To Calm Farmers After Trump Biofuel Talks

By Jarrett Renshaw

Reuters, February 28, 2018

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Legal Defense Fund For Trump Aides Launches Amid Questions About Donor Transparency

By Michelle Ye Hee Lee

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

A new legal defense fund designed to help defray the costs faced by aides to President Trump drawn into the various Russia investigations has yet to answer key questions regarding how it will vet donors and provide transparency about the contributors who finance the effort.

The Patriot Legal Expense Fund Trust filed paperwork Tuesday with the Internal Revenue Service and the Delaware secretary of state, declaring it will operate as a political committee and help defray the legal costs of "eligible persons" involved in the investigations.

The trust plans to allow both individuals and "entities" to make unlimited donations that will be pooled to defray the costs of multiple recipients, according to paperwork filed in January with the Office of Government Ethics.

But the filings offered little insight into how the fund will operate, raising concerns about its transparency and how it will comply with conflict of interest rules, ethics experts said.

Attorneys from the Washington-based law firm Wiley Rein, who established the fund, declined to comment. The White House did not respond to requests for comment. A news release announcing the launch of the trust offered few details, and a spokesman and the interim manager for the fund did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Questions about how the fund will raise and distribute money are building amid signs that special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's investigation is intensifying.

According to figures released last month by the White House, at least 48 White House staff, campaign staff and others affiliated with the campaign have voluntarily given interviews to the special counsel or congressional committees.

Trump associates pulled into the inquiries said they are contending with growing legal costs.

Michael Caputo, a former Trump campaign aide who has been interviewed by the House Intelligence Committee and contacted for two interviews by two Senate committees, estimates his legal bills will range from \$75,000 to \$125,000.

"There are dozens of people in this situation, some of them much worse than me," said Caputo, who added that he has spoken with numerous aides worried about their legal bills.

"Everyone is talking about it privately," he said. "If this Patriot Fund is real and they can help any one of us pay our legal bills, it would be a real blessing."

One reason for the delay in the fund's launch has been a search for an administrator to manage the trust, according to an official familiar with the planning.

Former congresswoman Nan Hayworth (R-N.Y.), who supported Trump in the 2016 campaign, was named interim manager of the fund Tuesday while the search for a permanent manager continues, according to the news release.

The trust's manager has broad authority to decide who gets reimbursed and how much, filings show.

Those who could be eligible to receive money through the fund include employees, consultants or volunteers in the Trump campaign, transition and administration who have been involved in the investigations, according to the statement from the trust.

Ty Cobb, the attorney handling the White House's response to the Russia investigators, said in November that those who were targeted or indicted in the investigation would not qualify to receive financial help from the legal fund. Tuesday's news release specified that legal expenses incurred "on behalf of any party which arise from the defense of any charge or indictment for dishonest, fraudulent or criminal activity" would not be reimbursed through the fund.

In deciding which aides to reimburse, the fund's manager cannot consider whether an aide's involvement in the investigation is favorable to Trump, according to the draft agreement.

Unlike the two legal defense funds established to assist President Bill Clinton and first lady Hillary Clinton in the 1990s, the Patriot Fund will pool money from a variety of donors and entities for an undetermined number of recipients. The two Clinton funds were established to defray the couple's legal expenses and were not available to their aides, documents establishing the funds show.

The Patriot Fund will include at least two separate accounts — one for federal employees and one for nonemployees — in an effort to avoid potential conflicts of interest posed by donors. But experts say the distinction between the accounts could get lost without careful tracking and vetting.

"The question is: Does one bad apple spoil the whole pot for everybody involved?" said Marilyn L. Glynn, a former Office of Government Ethics general counsel who helped shape disclosure and contribution requirements for the Clinton funds.

The fund's filings indicate that donors will be responsible for flagging any potential conflicts by filling out a questionnaire that asks them about foreign lobbying and federal contracts, among other issues.

Under IRS guidelines, the fund will be required to disclose donors who give \$200 or more monthly or quarterly in an even year, which would mean its first disclosure would probably be filed in mid-April. Officials have not yet said how often they plan to disclose the names of contributors.

Donations to legal defense funds for public officials usually are capped at a certain amount. Members of Congress have donation limits set through congressional rules — \$5,000 annually per source for the House and \$10,000 for the Senate, according to research by Ellen Aprill, a tax law expert at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. Donations to the Clintons' legal fund were voluntarily capped at \$1,000 for the first fund and \$10,000 for the second, according to Aprill.

But the Patriot Fund's filings do not address whether there will be any limits on how much each contributor can give.

Even though the fund said it will not accept anonymous contributions, it will take donations from entities — which could include limited liability companies, according to experts who reviewed the Office of Government Ethics filing. Donations given through LLCs can often mask the identity of the contributors.

"This is strikingly different from either of the Clinton legal defense funds," said Kathleen Clark, legal and government ethics professor at Washington University School

of Law. "The bottom line is: There is an astounding level of secrecy."

The Office of Government Ethics last month reviewed the fund's draft agreement and found that it complied with federal rules. The office said it "does not approve or disapprove of specific legal defense funds."

Alice Crites and Carol D. Leonnig contributed to this report.

Judge Sets Sept. 17 Trial Date For Manafort On Mueller Charges

Move could put former Trump campaign chairman on trial at height of midterm election season

By Josh Gerstein

Politico, February 28, 2018

A judge in Washington on Wednesday set a Sept. 17 trial date for former Trump campaign chief Paul Manafort on charges from special counsel Robert Mueller, including money laundering and failing to register as a foreign agent.

The decision from U.S. District Court Judge Amy Berman Jackson would put Manafort on trial at the height of the midterm campaign season, a potentially unwelcome distraction for Republicans as they try to maintain majorities in Congress.

Manafort also faces the prospect of another trial in Alexandria, Virginia, on a separate indictment Mueller's team obtained earlier this month accusing the veteran lobbyist and political consultant of 18 counts of tax and bank fraud. Manafort is scheduled to be arraigned in that case on Friday. No trial date has been set there.

During the brief hearing Wednesday morning at which Jackson scheduled the Washington trial, Manafort stood before the judge and entered a formal "not guilty" plea to a revised indictment in the D.C. case that effectively transfers to Virginia some charges related to offshore bank accounts.

Jackson also scolded Manafort and his team for a statement his spokesman issued Friday maintaining his innocence despite the guilty pleas tendered earlier that day by his longtime aide, Rick Gates, who is now cooperating with Mueller's office.

The judge said the comments appeared to run afoul of the order she issued in November limiting public statements about the case by lawyers involved and by the defendants.

"I can understand the impulse to not let that go by without stating your innocence, [but] in issuing that statement about the prosecution, I believe it's contrary to the order," said Jackson, an appointee of President Barack Obama.

Jackson said she wasn't going to take action in response to last week's statement but warned she would if there were further violations.

Manafort defense attorney Kevin Downing indicated that he believes Jackson's order and a 1991 Supreme Court

precedent it cited do not authorize a complete blackout of all comments by the parties in a criminal case. The defense lawyer said, as he's suggested before in court, that he plans to file a motion to clarify the order.

The order's language does not appear to bar all public comments by the parties and lawyers but only those "that pose a substantial likelihood of material prejudice to this case."

However, Jackson noted that she offered both sides the opportunity to object to her order last year and neither did. "I'll read anything you file," she said.

During Wednesday's hearing, the judge also expressed some concern about "overlap" between the Washington case and the Virginia one, although she said ultimately the burden of two successive trials is likely to fall most heavily on the defense.

"It seems the government is setting itself up to put on the same evidence twice in different courtrooms," Jackson said. "There's a risk of inconsistent [rulings] on the motions and evidentiary rulings and jury findings."

Ultimately, though, Jackson said she didn't view the parallel cases as a big problem. "The burden is at its least on the courts. We can handle two trials," she said.

Prosecutor Greg Andres stressed that Mueller's team gave Manafort the option to face a single case in Washington on all the charges, but Manafort declined to waive his right to have the tax charges brought in Virginia, which is where he lived when he filed the tax returns at issue.

Jackson predicted the case in Virginia will move along rapidly in a court known for hosting what many lawyers call a "rocket docket."

"You'll have a trial date soon there," she said.

As Manafort sat at the defense table Wednesday, there was much more room than at past sessions. It was the first public court hearing in the case at which Gates and his legal team were absent.

At the outset of the hearing, the judge expressed her condolences to Manafort about the death of his father-in-law last week.

Jackson has rejected a couple of offers by Manafort to secure his release from house arrest by pledging properties to secure the \$10 million bail. But the former Trump campaign chairman thanked the judge for allowing him to travel to Long Island earlier this week to attend wake, funeral and burial services for his father-in-law, Joseph Bond, who died Saturday at age 89.

"I appreciate the court's indulgence," Manafort said just before his arraignment Wednesday.

Manafort Could Face Almost 20 Years In Prison On D.C. Charges

By Andrew M Harris And David Voreacos

Bloomberg News, February 28, 2018

Paul Manafort could be sentenced to almost 20 years in prison under federal sentencing guidelines based solely on the charges he faces in a Washington federal court, Special Counsel Robert Mueller said.

A final sentence would be determined by a judge, if Manafort were convicted, and the judge can impose a harsher, or a more lenient, sentence than recommended by the guidelines.

Once the chairman of President Donald Trump's election campaign, the former international political consultant pleaded not guilty Wednesday to a revised five-count indictment unsealed in Washington last week. He's accused of conspiring to defraud the Treasury Department, conspiracy to launder money, failure to disclose his lobbying for a pro-Russian Ukrainian government and with making false statements to federal agents. His trial is scheduled for Sept. 17.

He's also scheduled to answer 18 other charges at the U.S. court in Alexandria, Virginia, on Friday. Mueller, on Wednesday, submitted to Alexandria Judge T.S. Ellis a report detailing the crimes of which Manafort is accused in both Virginia and Washington.

Manafort's defense was made more difficult by last week's decision of his long-time business associate Rick Gates to plead guilty to two charges in Washington and cooperate in the special counsel's probe.

Manafort, 68, is charged in Virginia with tax fraud, failure to report foreign bank and financial accounts and, most significantly, with nine counts of bank fraud and bank fraud conspiracy. The five tax-fraud charges alone could result in a sentence of more than 10 years, according to the federal guidelines, prosecutors said.

Mueller Asking If Trump Knew About Hacked Democratic Emails Before Release

NBC News, February 28, 2018

Special counsel Robert Mueller's team is asking witnesses pointed questions about whether Donald Trump was aware that Democratic emails had been stolen before that was publicly known, and whether he was involved in their strategic release, according to multiple people familiar with the probe.

Mueller's investigators have asked witnesses whether Trump was aware of plans for WikiLeaks to publish the emails. They have also asked about the relationship between GOP operative Roger Stone and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and why Trump took policy positions favorable to Russia.

The line of questioning suggests the special counsel, who is tasked with examining whether there was collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia during the 2016

election, is looking into possible coordination between WikiLeaks and Trump associates in disseminating the emails, which U.S. intelligence officials say were stolen by Russia.

Trump has repeatedly denied any collusion and has described the special counsel's investigation as "illegal" and a "witch hunt."

In one line of questioning, investigators have focused on Trump's public comments in July 2016 asking Russia to find emails that were deleted by his then-opponent Hillary Clinton from a private server she maintained while secretary of state. The comments came at a news conference on July 27, 2016, just days after WikiLeaks began publishing the Democratic National Committee emails. "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing," Trump said.

Witnesses have been asked whether Trump himself knew then that Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta, whose emails were released several months later, had already been targeted. They were also asked if Trump was advised to make the statement about Clinton's emails from someone outside his campaign, and if the witnesses had reason to believe Trump tried to coordinate the release of the DNC emails to do the most damage to Clinton, the people familiar with the matter said.

The White House spokesman at the time, Sean Spicer, would later say that then-candidate Trump had been "joking" when he called on Russia to hack his opponent's emails.

"In 2016, the hack of my emails was often treated as a politically interesting event," said Podesta to NBC News via email. "For the record, it was a crime. Glad Mueller is trying to get to the bottom of everyone involved in that crime."

What did Stone know?

Investigators are also asking questions about Trump's longtime relationship with Stone, the Republican operative, according to witnesses. Investigators have asked about Stone's contacts with WikiLeaks during the campaign and if he's ever met with Assange.

"They wanted to see if there was a scheme. Was Stone working on the side for Trump?" after he officially left the campaign, one person interviewed by the special counsel's office said, adding that it seemed investigators wanted to know, "Was this a big plot?"

Russia stole emails from the DNC and Podesta, according to U.S. intelligence officials, and released batches of them through WikiLeaks starting in July 2016 and up until the election.

[Click here to see NBC's interactive Russia timeline](#)

As part of his plea agreement with the special counsel, former Trump foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos revealed that in a conversation in late April 2016, he was told by a professor with ties to Russian officials that they had "dirt" on Clinton in the form of "thousands of emails." A 10-page memo from Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee

released Saturday noted that the Justice Department's October 2016 application for a FISA warrant on another Trump foreign policy adviser, Carter Page, included the fact that Russian agents had previewed their hack and dissemination of stolen emails to Papadopoulos.

Investigators were interested in statements Stone made in the final month of the 2016 campaign that strongly suggested he was aware of information the group had before it became public and when it might be released. In one instance, he wrote on Twitter that "it would soon be Podesta's time in the barrel." Weeks later Podesta's stolen emails were released by WikiLeaks.

As WikiLeaks was strategically publishing stolen emails in the closing months of the campaign, Trump also publicly said he loved the group. He mentioned WikiLeaks 145 times during the last month of the 2016 campaign. In 2017, President Trump's CIA director, Mike Pompeo, would label the group a hostile non-state actor.

Investigators also have shown interest in any connections Stone has to WikiLeaks and Assange, its founder. Stone has said he communicated with Assange and WikiLeaks through an intermediary he described as a journalist.

The Atlantic reported this week that Stone exchanged direct messages on Twitter with WikiLeaks. Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, has said his committee should subpoena Twitter to produce any direct messages "from and between the Twitter handles identified as relevant to the Russia investigation," including WikiLeaks, Assange and Stone. According to Schiff, Twitter has told the committee it won't produce such messages "absent compulsion."

Mueller's team has asked witnesses if Stone ever met with Assange. Stone has denied ever communicating directly with Assange.

Stone served briefly on the Trump campaign in 2015, leaving in August of that year. At the time he said he quit, while the campaign said he was fired.

Investigators have asked witnesses about Stone's time on the campaign and what his relationship was like with Trump after he left.

"How often did they talk? Who really fired him? Was he really fired?" a witness said, describing the line of questioning.

In a statement, Stone said he had "no advance knowledge of the content or source of information published by WikiLeaks."

"I have not been interviewed by the special counsel," wrote Stone. "I never discussed WikiLeaks, Assange or the Hillary disclosures with candidate Trump, before during or after the election. I have no idea what he knew about them, from who or when. I have never met Assange."

Stone appeared before the House Intelligence Committee for four hours last September. In his prepared opening statement, which he also delivered publicly on the InfoWars YouTube channel, Stone denied that he ever engaged "in any illegal activities on behalf of my clients, or the causes which I support." He denied having direct contact with Assange and called any exchanges with Guccifer 2.0, which took credit for hacking the DNC, "innocuous."

And he said his tweet predicting that Podesta would spend time in the "barrel" was in the context of the coverage of the resignation of former Trump campaign chair Paul Manafort, whom he called his "boyhood friend and colleague," over allegations about business activities in Ukraine. Trump's policy positions

At that same July 2016 news conference where he referenced Clinton's missing emails, candidate Trump said he was open to lifting sanctions on Russia and possibly recognizing its annexation of Crimea in Ukraine. The U.S. and its European allies had sanctioned Russia because of its intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, which the Obama administration refused to recognize.

Investigators have asked witnesses why Trump took policy positions that were friendly toward Russia and spoke positively about Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to people familiar with the probe.

Investigators have also inquired whether Trump met with Putin before becoming president, including if a meeting took place during Trump's 2013 visit to Moscow for his Miss Universe pageant. Trump has given conflicting responses on when he first met Putin.

At least one witness was asked about Trump's business interests in Moscow and surmised afterward that the special counsel investigation may be focused on business dealings that took place during the campaign.

Witnesses also have been asked about Stone's connections to Manafort.

At least one witness has been asked about Trump aide Dan Scavino, specifically about any involvement he may have had in the campaign's data operation. Scavino currently runs the White House's social media operations and is one of Trump's closest aides.

NBC News reached out to Trump's legal team and the White House. The White House declined to comment on Scavino "out of respect for the Office of Special Counsel and its process. ... The White House remains fully cooperative with the Office of Special Counsel and we look forward to [the investigation's] prompt conclusion."

John Dowd, the president's outside attorney, told NBC News, "We do not discuss our knowledge of or communications with the special counsel."

Peter Carr, a spokesman for Mueller, declined to comment.

EXCLUSIVE: Roger Stone's Full WikiLeaks Conversation And Passport Photos

By Saagar Enjeti

[Daily Caller](#), February 28, 2018

Roger Stone's full Twitter private message conversation with WikiLeaks shows no further engaged conversation beyond October 16, 2016, a full record of the conversation obtained by The Daily Caller reveals.

Roger Stone's full DM's with Wikileaks

The messages show WikiLeaks' post-2016 election attempts to continue communicating with Stone by providing pictures of an email exchange with CNN's Andrew Kaczynski. Stone did not respond to the message.

Kaczynski told The Daily Caller the direct messages were in reference to a March 2017 story, but that he did not directly quote the emails.

"The true copy of this exchange provided many months ago to the House Intelligence Committee demonstrates I had no 'collaboration' with WikiLeaks," Stone said in a statement to TheDC. His statement follows a partial publishing Tuesday of his exchanges with WikiLeaks by The Atlantic.

Stone has long been at the center of controversy over allegations that he worked with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to coordinate the release of hacked DNC emails during the 2016 presidential election.

"The content of the exchange with WikiLeaks shows neither any claim by me to have any information beyond what Assange himself had said publicly and reiterates the statement by WikiLeaks that I had not communicated with them prior to the release of the DNC emails that were both accurate and so damaging to Hillary," he explained. "My frustration that whoever is manning the WikiLeaks Twitter direct messages is unaware that I had confirmed Assange's claim to have Clinton material is also reflected. That was what I meant when I said WikiLeaks 'leaks.'"

"Stone comes off as an aging diva trying to get on the Fame Train with a bunch of people in way over their heads with the Russians," Intelligence expert and Naval War College professor Tom Nichols told TheDC after reviewing the full exchange. Nichols took care to note to clarify that following The Atlantic's Tuesday story, the evidence was still currently lacking of any collaboration between Stone and WikiLeaks.

Accusations of collaboration with WikiLeaks have dogged Stone since he made statements in August 2016 that he was in "communication" with Assange and in October 2016 that he had a "back channel" of communication with the WikiLeaks founder. Stone later clarified that he had communicated with someone at WikiLeaks via radio host Randy Credico, who confirmed previous statements made by Assange. Credico has denied serving as a back channel to The Daily Beast.

Assange also pushed back against Stone's claim that he was in contact with him in Twitter direct messages from August 2016 recently revealed by The Intercept.

"Stone is a bullshitter," Assange said. "Trying to a) imply that he knows anything b) that he contributed to our hard work."

Stone told TheDC that his August 2016 twitter prediction that "it will soon Podesta's time in the barrel" was "based on the January 2016 Panama Papers exposure of the Podesta brother's Russian business dealings with oligarchs close to Putin in banking, gas and uranium."

A singular photo of Stone's passport obtained by TheDC shows no foreign arrival stamps between 2010 and 2017, though no additional photos of the passport were provided to TheDC. "My passport proves I never left the country in 2016. I did drop my card off at the Ecuadorian Embassy when I was in London to address the Oxford Union in February of this year, to punk the British media and protest the continued persecution of Julian Assange who I believe is an honest journalist with a stunning record for accuracy."

Roger Stone's Secret Messages With WikiLeaks

By Natasha Bertrand

The Atlantic, February 27, 2018

On March 17, 2017, WikiLeaks tweeted that it had never communicated with Roger Stone, a longtime confidante and informal adviser to President Donald Trump. In his interview with the House Intelligence Committee last September, Stone, who testified under oath, told lawmakers that he had communicated with WikiLeaks via an "intermediary," whom he identified only as a "journalist." He declined to reveal that person's identity to the committee, he told reporters later.

Private Twitter messages obtained by The Atlantic show that Stone and WikiLeaks, a radical-transparency group, communicated directly on October 13, 2016—and that WikiLeaks sought to keep its channel to Stone open after Trump won the election. The existence of the secret correspondence marks yet another strange twist in the White House's rapidly swelling Russia scandal. Stone and Trump have been friends for decades, which raises key questions about what the president knew about Stone's interactions with WikiLeaks during the campaign. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The depth of Stone's relationship with WikiLeaks and Julian Assange has been closely scrutinized by congressional investigators examining whether Trump associates coordinated with Russia—or anyone serving as a cut-out for Moscow—to damage Hillary Clinton's candidacy. Stone confirmed the authenticity of the messages, but called them "ridiculously out of context" and "a paste up." He said that he

provided the complete exchange to the House Intelligence Committee, but did not immediately respond to a request to provide his own record of the conversation to The Atlantic.

A screenshot of the exchange, which has not been previously reported, was provided to the House Intelligence Committee last year by a third-party source. The private messages confirm that Stone considered himself a "friend" of WikiLeaks, which was branded a "non-state hostile intelligence service" by CIA Director Mike Pompeo last April. Stone insisted that the messages vindicated his account. "They prove conclusively that I had no advance knowledge of content or source of WikiLeaks publications," he said. "I merely had confirmed Assange's public claim that he had information on Hillary Clinton and he would publish it." He also narrowed the scope of his earlier denials, saying that he'd only denied having communicated directly with Assange, not with WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

These messages have been reproduced by The Atlantic's art team.

"I have never said or written that I had any direct communication with Julian Assange and have always clarified in numerous interviews and speeches that my communication with WikiLeaks was through the aforementioned journalist," Stone told the committee in his prepared statement in September. The full hearing was held behind closed doors and the transcript has not been made public. At least one lawmaker had already obtained a screenshot of the exchange before Stone testified, according to two sources familiar with the matter who requested anonymity to discuss the ongoing investigation.

The correspondence raises questions about whether Stone—who served as Trump's lobbyist in Washington in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and had been encouraging him to run for president for over a decade—has kept secret any interactions that may be of interest to congressional investigators examining Russia's election interference.

Stone also exchanged private Twitter messages in August and September of 2016 with a user known as Guccifer 2.0. Guccifer claimed in a posting on their Wordpress site to have "penetrated Hillary Clinton's and other Democrats' mail servers," but the self-described hacker was later characterized by U.S. officials as a front for Russian military intelligence. Stone only published that exchange after it was revealed by The Smoking Gun, a website that publishes mugshots and other public documents.

On the afternoon of October 13, 2016, Stone sent WikiLeaks a private Twitter message. "Since I was all over national TV, cable and print defending wikileaks and assange against the claim that you are Russian agents and debunking the false charges of sexual assault as trumped up bs you may want to reexamine the strategy of attacking me- cordially R."

WikiLeaks—whose Twitter account is run “by a rotating staff,” according to Assange—replied an hour later: “We appreciate that. However, the false claims of association are being used by the democrats to undermine the impact of our publications. Don’t go there if you don’t want us to correct you.”

“Ha!” Stone responded on October 15. “The more you ‘correct’ me the more people think you’re lying. Your operation leaks like a sieve. You need to figure out who your friends are.” Assange’s internet connection was cut off days later by the Ecuadorian embassy—which granted him diplomatic asylum in London in 2012—following WikiLeaks’ release of emails that had been stolen by Russian hackers from Hillary Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta’s inbox. The morning after Donald Trump won the election, however, WikiLeaks sent Stone another message. “Happy? We are now more free to communicate.”

It is unclear whether Stone and WikiLeaks kept in touch, using Twitter or another platform, after the election. WikiLeaks continued to insist through at least last March that neither the organization nor Assange had ever communicated with Stone directly. Stone later identified radio host Randy Credico as the intermediary, but Credico denied that in an interview with The Daily Beast earlier this month. “There was no backchannel to Roger Stone, and I think that his testimony was a lot of bravado,” Credico said. “Roger’s a showman.”

The substance of the messages does seem to corroborate, however, Stone and WikiLeaks’ denials prior to October 13 that they had coordinated in any significant way. WikiLeaks indicated that Stone’s claims of association—even if through a backchannel, as Stone alleged—were false. But the screenshots do not show whether Stone and WikiLeaks communicated prior to October 13 or after November 9, 2016.

Democrats have asked GOP members to subpoena Twitter for the private messages of Trump associates currently under investigation in the Russia probe, according to one of the sources familiar with the internal proceedings. But the majority has so far refused. “It is important to verify that information by subpoenaing the records directly from third parties—a step the Majority has consistently refused to take,” said Adam Schiff, a California Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee. Mike Conaway, the Texas Republican who is leading the committee’s investigation, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. As The Atlantic’s Julia Ioffe first disclosed last fall, WikiLeaks also exchanged private Twitter messages with Donald Trump Jr., who provided the correspondence to congressional investigators. WikiLeaks continued to message Trump Jr. through July 2017, “actively soliciting” his cooperation on ventures ranging from obtaining the president’s tax returns to appointing Assange Australia’s U.S. ambassador.

On July 22, 2016, just before the Democratic National Convention kicked off, WikiLeaks published thousands of emails that had been stolen from Democratic National Committee servers by hackers the U.S. intelligence community has since linked back to Russia. Stone told the Southwest Broward Republican Organization on August 8 that he had “communicated with Assange” and believed that “the next tranche of his documents”—which Assange had hinted at in an earlier interview with CNN—pertained to the Clinton Foundation. Stone soon walked that back, claiming instead that he communicated with Assange via an intermediary who he identified last November as Randy Credico. He declined to identify the intermediary in his interview with the House Intelligence Committee, but later changed his mind and claimed it had been Credico.

On October 4, 2016, Assange held a press conference to mark WikiLeaks’s 10th anniversary. The event had been hyped by supporters of then-candidate Trump, including Stone, as an “October surprise” that would completely derail Clinton’s presidential campaign just over a month before the election. On October 2, Stone told the far-right talk-radio host Alex Jones that he had been “assured that the mother lode” was coming. The next day, he tweeted that he had “total confidence that @wikileaks” and his “hero Julian Assange” would come through.

At his press conference, however, Assange gave no hints of what was to come, leaving his fans, and many of Trump’s, disappointed. Still, Stone was not deterred. “Liberals thinking Assange will stand down are wishful thinking. Payload coming #Lockthemup,” he tweeted on October 5, 2016.

The payload actually came two days later: WikiLeaks began publishing the contents of Podesta’s inbox, which had been infiltrated by Russian hackers seven months earlier. Stone told The Daily Caller on October 12 that Assange had delayed the email dump on purpose: “I was led to believe that there would be a major release on a previous Wednesday,” he said. He denied, however, that he had been given “advance knowledge of the details” and maintained that he was only in touch with Assange “through an intermediary.”

On the morning of October 13, WikiLeaks issued a clarification: “WikiLeaks has never communicated with Roger Stone as we have previously, repeatedly stated.” It was later that day when Stone confronted WikiLeaks in a private message, and accused the organization of “attacking” him. WikiLeaks did not seem fazed by the confrontation, and reopened its line of communication with Stone on November 9. Fourteen months later, Stone visited the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where Assange has been holed up for more than five years.

“I didn’t go and see” Assange, Stone told The Daily Beast last month. “I dropped off a card to be a smart ass.”

Jailed Instagram Model Wants To Trade Secrets For Freedom

By Todd Pitman And Nataliya Vasilyeva

Associated Press, February 28, 2018

PATTAYA, Thailand (AP) — A Belarusian woman jailed in Thailand for offering sex lessons without a work permit says she has a story to tell involving the Kremlin, Russian billionaires and even the president of the United States.

Anastasia Vashukevich, whose extraordinary claims and racy selfies have propelled her to internet fame in recent weeks, told The Associated Press from a police van Wednesday that she fears for her life, and wants to exchange information on alleged Russian ties to Donald Trump's campaign for her own personal safety. But she refused for now to offer any such evidence, and it's not clear if she has any.

Vashukevich's story offers a glimpse into the shady world of Russian oligarchs. Trump's onetime campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, also had ties to that world through his consulting work for one of those oligarchs. Manafort has been indicted on money-laundering charges related to his overseas consulting work by special counsel Robert Mueller. But Mueller has offered no evidence that Manafort linked his Russian contacts to Trump's campaign or helped Russia meddle in the 2016 U.S. election.

That has not stopped Vashukevich from claiming that she has such evidence as she faces possible deportation back to Russia.

Vashukevich shot to fame in early February when Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, one of President Vladimir Putin's top foes, published an investigation drawing on Vashukevich's social media posts suggesting corrupt links between billionaire Oleg Deripaska and a top Kremlin official, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko. The report featured video from Deripaska's yacht in 2016, when Vashukevich claims she was having an affair with him.

Russians have focused on the ties between Deripaska and Prikhodko. But now Vashukevich says — so far without proof — that she can link the Kremlin to Trump and Manafort, who worked for Deripaska a decade before Trump hired him.

Even Navalny told the AP on Wednesday that he has "certain doubts" that Vashukevich has any evidence about alleged direct ties between Russia and the Trump campaign.

"I think such statements are made because of fears for her own life because they have been detained in Thailand," he said, adding he believes her fears are well-founded.

Navalny's report made no claim that Vashukevich knew anything about a Russian campaign to influence the U.S. election, and she has produced no evidence that she does.

As for her claims of Deripaska's ties to the Kremlin official, Deripaska has called them nonsense when Navalny alleged them.

In an emailed response Feb. 8, Deripaska's spokesman said: "These scandalous and mendacious assumptions are driven by sensationalism and we totally refute these outrageous false allegations in the strongest possible way."

Deripaska sued Vashukevich and her "sex guru," Alexander Kirillov, for breach of privacy. The Russian court imposed an injunction, and communications providers blocked access to Navalny's website for several weeks until he deleted the videos.

A Feb. 15 statement from Deripaska said: "Mr. Deripaska's claim is to protect his right to privacy and has nothing to do with any political struggle between Mr. Navalny and his political opponents."

A request for comment Wednesday from the Russian government went unanswered.

Peter Carr, a spokesman for Mueller, declined to comment Wednesday.

On Sunday, Vashukevich was arrested along with nine other people, including Kirillov, in the Thai resort of Pattaya while giving sex lessons to Russian tourists. Immigration Police Maj. Satawat Srirattanapong said the 10 were charged with working without a permit, and one with having an expired visa.

Vashukevich said she won't give details of what she knows until she is guaranteed she won't be sent to Russia.

"I can say something only when I will be in a safe place, sorry, because I am worried about my life," Vashukevich told the AP from a police van that was taking the detainees from Pattaya to Bangkok's Immigration Detention Center.

Vashukevich had earlier posted a video on Instagram, also apparently made while in custody in Pattaya, addressed to "Dear American media."

"I didn't want to tell you about many things. Now they're trying to lock us up," she said. "But now I'm ready to put together all the pieces of the puzzle that you have been missing, and back it up with audio and video regarding the ties of our esteemed lawmakers with Manafort, Trump and all this buzz around the U.S. election. I know a lot."

Trump has repeatedly denied that he colluded with Russia to influence the U.S. election.

Kirillov, the "sex guru" known in Russia for staging high-profile sexual happenings that usually involve sending scantily clad women out in public, told AP from the police van that the Russian government was behind their arrests.

"Political reasons. We know so much. So that's why they want us to go to Russia," he said. "We think that in a few days, maybe even today, they will send us to Russia, very fast, and I think you will lose us, and never see us more."

Kirillov and Vashukevich have both recorded their activities on social media, with racy photos and videos taken in many countries. One of the tamer photos on Kirillov's feed shows him posing in front of Trump Tower in New York. Kirillov, who Thai police say is Russian, posts under the

pseudonym Alex Lesley. Vashukevich, who is from Belarus, uses the name Nastya Rybka.

They were arrested in a hotel meeting room in Pattaya, a seaside resort noted for its sex industry and popularity with Russian visitors. The lessons were attended by about 40 Russian tourists, many wearing T-shirts bearing the English words "Sex animator" with an arrow pointing to the wearer's crotch. Thai news media cited police as saying that the meeting was raided because hotel staff reported hearing strange sounds.

Satawat, the police major, said all 10 arrested people have had their visas revoked and will be detained at the Immigration Detention Center in Bangkok until the charges of working illegally are resolved. He said police have up to 48 days to process the cases before handing them to prosecutors. If they plead guilty, he said, their cases could end without trial and they could leave the country.

Canceling a visa normally allows a country to expel a person without having to go through the legal process of extradition.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Wednesday that the Russians' case had anything to do with a visit to Thailand by Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. He said Patrushev often makes overseas visits and that they are arranged in advance.

"It's ludicrous to link this to the detention of Russian nationals in Thailand," he said.

Navalny said given recent events — including a cocaine bust at the Russian Embassy in Argentina — he wasn't so sure.

"I don't know what to think," Navalny told the AP. "Shows like 'Homeland' begin to look entirely realistic when you look at what is happening in Russia now. We thought the scriptwriters made the most impossible things up, but in Russia the most absurd things are possible."

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Belarusian Woman Says She Has Trump, Russia Dirt

By Richard S. Ehrlich

Washington Times, February 28, 2018

BANGKOK | A Belarusian woman jailed for alleged for sex-related activity in Thailand, asked the U.S. Embassy on Wednesday for asylum in exchange for what she says is criminal evidence on murky contacts between a Russian metals oligarch, a top Kremlin aide to President Vladimir Putin and President Trump.

Anastasia Vashukevich, the reported "mistress" of Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska who is also known as Nastya Rybka, figures prominently in a sensational video

expose released earlier this month by Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and quickly suppressed by the Kremlin. Relying heavily on Ms. Vashukevich's writing and Instagram account, the video charged there are close personal and financial ties between Mr. Deripaska and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodkho, a close aide to Mr. Putin.

Mr. Navalny's video said Mr. Deripaska was a key link to Mr. Trump because of his long relationship with former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort.

Mr. Prikhodko and Mr. Navalny were named in their letter which said "U.S. relations with Russia" and "very important information for USA" were involved.

"We have photo-video-audio of crymes [sic] of Russian government. And I give them USA if you help us," the letter said, according to Khaosod English, a Thailand-based online news service which published a photograph of the letter.

Addressed "To USA Consul," it was written by Alexander Kirillov, a Russian also known as Alex Lesley, who was one of nine Russians who were jailed along with Ms. Vashukevich. The letter did not reveal any evidence or details to support their claim.

The "political asylum" request came the same day Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha met in Bangkok with the visiting Russian security council secretary and former Federal Security Service director Nikolai Patrushev. Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told The Associated Press on Wednesday that it was "ludicrous" to link the visit to the detention of Russian nationals in Thailand.

The Russian and Belarusian tourists were arrested on Sunday in Pattaya, a beach resort on the Gulf of Thailand with a reputation for sex tourism, where they allegedly participated in illegal lessons about sex taught by Mr. Kirillov.

Thai officials said they received complaints about the \$700 week-long class and, after raiding the meeting, arrested the 10 for visa violations and working without a permit. Foreigners working without a permit can be jailed up to five years but are usually fined and deported.

Ms. Vashukevich calls herself Nastya Rybka on her Instagram account (@nastya_rybka.ru), where she introduces herself to more than 100,000 followers as "Deripaska's mistress."

In an Instagram posting Tuesday, she claimed to be the "only witness and the missing link in the connection between Russia and the U.S. elections — the long chain of Oleg Deripaska, Prikhodkho, Manafort, and Trump."

"In exchange for help from U.S. intelligence services and a guarantee of my safety, I am prepared to provide the necessary information to America or to Europe or to the country which can buy me out of Thai prison."

Mr. Manafort has been indicted on money-laundering charges related to his overseas consulting work by special counsel Robert Mueller. But the prosecutor has offered no evidence that Mr. Manafort linked his Russian contacts to

Trump's campaign or helped Russia meddle in the 2016 U.S. election.

Mr. Deripaska has denied the charges and threatened to sue media outlets that report on Mr. Navalny's allegations.

Ms. Vashukevich's last update from jail on Wednesday said that "if we go back to Russia, we will die in Russian's [sic] prison or they will kill us."

One hour earlier, Ms. Vashukevich wrote: "Please USA help us not to die from Russians!"

Even Mr. Navalny told The Associated Press that he has "certain doubts" that Ms. Vashukevich has any evidence about direct ties between Russia and the Trump campaign.

"I think such statements are made because of fears for her own life because they have been detained in Thailand," he said, adding he believes her fears are well-founded.

• This article was based in part on wire service reports.

Buzzfeed Cost Russian Entrepreneur Up To \$170 Million By Publishing Trump Dossier: Expert

By Rowan Scarborough

Washington Times, February 28, 2018

The analyst who estimated libel damages for the infamous Hulk Hogan libel trial says that a Russian entrepreneur lost \$60 million to \$170 million due to BuzzFeed posting the unverified anti-Trump dossier in January 2017.

The assessment came from damages expert Jeff Anderson, who has been retained by CEO Aleksej Gubarev in his libel suit against BuzzFeed and editor Ben Smith. Mr. Anderson's multi-million-dollar estimate was revealed on Wednesday in a pre-trial hearing in U.S. District Court in Florida.

Financed by the Democratic Party and produced by ex-British spy Christopher Steele, the unverified dossier accused Mr. Gubarev of participating in the hacking of Democrats during the 2016 election. Mr. Steele's sources said Mr. Gubarev, through his XBT Holdings, attacked the computers with spy ware and porn.

Mr. Gubarev immediately denied the charge. BuzzFeed apologized and redacted his name from the last of Mr. Steele's 17 memos meant to bring down the candidacy of Donald Trump. Mr. Steele said Mr. Gubarev did the hacking under duress from FSB, Russia's internal intelligence arm.

The Russian-born Mr. Gubarev founded and nurtured a company that today supplies web-basing servers to over 40,000 clients globally. Why Mr. Steele's Russian sources accused Mr. Gubarev remains unclear.

His lawyers have contended the dossier greatly damaged him financially, and on Tuesday affixed a number for a jury to consider.

Mr. Anderson's expert analysis was used by pro-wrestler Mr. Hogan in his successful 2016 suit against Gawker, a trial also held in Florida.

Gawker published sex tapes of the celebrity in 2012. A jury awarded him \$140 million. Gawker went bankrupt and a judge awarded Mr. Hogan \$31 million from liquidation assets in December 2016.

Mr. Anderson, director of valuation and analytics at Consor Intellectual Asset, testified that that Gawker increased its corporate value by \$15 million by posting the private tapes.

He is now in Mr. Gubarev's legal corner.

Mr. Gubarev also sued Mr. Steele in a London court. Mr. Steele admitted in a filing that he did not verify the unsolicited charges against the capitalist.

BuzzFeed has hired consulting company to try to prove the dossier is true, a move scoffed at by Gubarev attorney Val Gurvits who told The Washington Times there is no evidence because his client is innocent.

The NSA Chief Spelled Out The Russian Threat. Is Trump Listening?

Washington Post, February 28, 2018

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION is derelict in its duty to protect the country from a foreign power's hostile intrusions. Do not take our word for it. Take that of Adm. Michael S. Rogers, a senior intelligence chief in that administration.

"We're taking steps, but we're probably not doing enough," Mr. Rogers said Tuesday about the government's response to Russian election interference. Russian President Vladimir Putin "has clearly come to the conclusion that 'there's little price to pay here and therefore I can continue this activity.'"

"If we don't change the dynamic here, this is going to continue, and 2016 won't be viewed as isolated," Mr. Rogers said. "This is something that will be sustained over time." This warning came two weeks after a panel of the nation's top intelligence leaders testified that they expect the Russians to intervene in the coming midterm elections.

What about those new anti-Russian sanctions that Congress forced President Trump to accept? Or the indictments that special counsel Robert S. Mueller III has brought against 13 Russians? "I think, in fairness, you can't say nothing's been done," Mr. Rogers said. "But the point would be, it hasn't been enough."

Though Mr. Rogers argued that the response to Russian interference should not be restricted to the cyber realm — indeed, it should include sanctions and other public punishments — it became clear in questioning that he could do more with expanded authorities the White House has not granted him.

Mr. Rogers is a uniformed military officer and, as the head of the National Security Agency and Cyber Command, one of the nation's top spies. Public candor about ongoing cyberdefense operations is not what one would expect from him. This is why his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee was striking. It also came on the same day NBC News reported that the intelligence community had evidence that the Russians had breached election websites or voter systems of seven states, in some cases intruding into highly sensitive material such as voting rolls. Though U.S. officials say the Russians did not alter the rolls or otherwise cook the vote, they might in the future if left unchecked.

The stakes can hardly be overstated. "I believe they're attempting to undermine our institutions," Mr. Rogers said. Even an isolated instance of vote- or voter-roll-tampering would corrode faith that everyone's vote is being counted and that election results reflect popular will. Without this belief, the American political process would lose its legitimacy, and the nation's politics would become dangerously unstable.

Mr. Trump reportedly does not like even hearing about Russian election meddling, let alone ordering his administration to mount a defense. But Mr. Rogers should be given all the authorities he needs to combat Russian election intrusion efforts at their source. Congress must get involved, if need be. Lawmakers should also send the FBI more money to fight election interference, demand more communication between federal authorities and state governments, and fund state efforts to replace old voting machines and secure election infrastructure. They can do all this within the next few weeks as they hammer out their final budget plans — and before it is too late.

Top NAFTA Goal Is Changing 'Rules Of Origin,' Trade Rep Says

By Sean Higgins

Washington Examiner, February 28, 2018

U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer told Congress Wednesday that the top goal for the renegotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement was to update the "rules of origin" for determining where products such as cars are manufactured.

Lighthizer did not sound confident that the Trump administration would be able to get that done, however. The seventh round of talks on the 1993 trade deal among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are underway in Mexico City.

"We are focusing our efforts on tightening rules of origin for products imported into the United States from Canada and Mexico for which we have significant trade imbalances, like automobiles and automotive parts. Our proposals seek to strengthen the rules of origin for such products, and make them more enforceable through stricter tracing requirements, to ensure that they contain considerable regional, and U.S.

specific, content," Lighthizer said in the 2018 Trade Policy Agenda and Annual Report.

Lighthizer said the other top goal was to limit provisions of the deal that encourage U.S. companies to outsource their operations to foreign countries. "The point of a trade deal is to create increased opportunities for market efficiency, not to encourage foreign investments that are otherwise not viable," he wrote.

He did not indicate that much progress had been made in either area, though, writing, "If we succeed with these core objectives, a renegotiated NAFTA would certainly prove a fairer deal for all Americans."

Reuters reported Tuesday that the USTR official handling the rules-of-origin issue, Jason Bernstein, returned to Washington soon after the current round of talks began and that USTR officials have been meeting privately with auto industry executives.

The Trump administration has used the NAFTA talks to push for raising the standard for cars and trucks to be declared "made in America" to require that 85 percent of the components come from North America, up from the current standard of 62.5 percent, and that at least half of the components come from the U.S. The proposal has received the cold shoulder from Canadian and Mexican officials, who say such a change would harm their economies by disrupting the auto industry supply chain, which is spread across the continent.

Eduardo Solis, the head of Mexico's automotive industry association, told reporters in Mexico City the government there had made no new counterproposal to the U.S. request. "All there is is the original U.S. proposal, which we've said is totally unacceptable," Solis said.

The talks are further complicated by an upcoming Mexican presidential election as well as the U.S. midterms in November. Chris Spear, the president of the American Trucking Associations, told the Washington Examiner Wednesday that it likely will be apparent in March whether a new NAFTA deal is in the works or if the talks get punted into the next year. March is "mission critical," he said.

Trump Officials Court Democrats Amid Nafta Talks

With focus on Mexican workers' wages, trade negotiators hope to win support from U.S. labor unions

By Jacob M. Schlesinger

Wall Street Journal, February 28, 2018

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Trump May Announce Steel And Aluminum Tariffs As Soon As Thursday

By Andrew Restuccia And Adam Behsudi

Politico, February 28, 2018

The White House is laying tentative plans to announce new tariffs on steel and aluminum imports as soon as Thursday, according to two people briefed on the planning.

Administration officials have begun reaching out to steel industry officials in advance of the possible announcement, which is expected to have large repercussions on global trade.

White House aides and others familiar with the issue cautioned that the details of the announcement were still in flux. Administration officials were engaged in a fierce debate Wednesday night about whether to make the announcement Thursday — or delay it altogether, according to the people.

One administration official said aides were still ironing out the legal details of the tariffs, so any announcement is expected to include few details. Another person briefed on the matter said the administration is not far enough along in the process to have something ready for the president to sign Thursday.

Trump has told people in recent days that he's interested in imposing a 25 percent tariff on steel imports and a 10 percent tariff on aluminum imports, according to one person briefed on the issue. But it remained unclear Wednesday night exactly what levels he will announce.

Industry sources said company executives from both the steel and aluminum sectors were being summoned to the White House.

A White House spokeswoman did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn has been arguing vociferously behind the scenes against the tariffs. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, national security adviser H.R. McMaster and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis have all also raised concerns about the actions, arguing that they could damage the United States' relationship with crucial allies.

But Trump has long been dead-set on imposing tariffs, and he has the support of the trade hawks in his administration, including White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross.

The announcement of major new tariffs on steel and aluminum could lead to a tit-for-tat trade fight with China, the European Union and other major world trade powers.

The decision, which was yet to be finalized among senior White House staff, would be the culmination of a nearly 11-month investigation into whether imports of steel and aluminum posed a threat to U.S. national security.

Senior administration officials have been debating the pending steel and aluminum tariffs for months — and the debate has pitted Trump's top aides against one another.

Shortly before he resigned amid domestic abuse allegations, White House staff secretary Rob Porter got into a

heated argument about the tariffs with Navarro in the Oval Office in front of the president, according to a person familiar with the issue.

Cohn and Porter had worked together for months to try to postpone, kill or narrow the scope of the tariffs. Porter organized weekly trade meetings at the White House to discuss the tariffs and other main issues in a bid to give the debate a more formal structure.

But Porter's resignation removed a fierce opponent of the tariffs from the West Wing and revived the chaotic policy review process that defined the early weeks of Trump's presidency.

Foreign trading partners have already promised swift retribution if they are caught in any major tariff action.

EU trade chief Cecilia Malmström warned earlier this week that the 28-nation trading bloc, a major producer of steel, was discussing different options. "If he hits hard, we will have to take countermeasures," the commissioner said after arriving at a meeting of EU trade ministers this week.

Trump ordered the Commerce Department to initiate investigations last April examining whether the imports posed a threat to national security. The probes were invoked under the rarely used Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962.

Commerce released the findings of those investigations and its recommendations earlier in February, finding that imports of the metals did endanger national security.

Ross made three recommendations for both steel and aluminum imports. However, Trump could ignore that advice and choose his own options.

For steel, the first option is the 24 percent tariff on all imports. The second would exclude most NATO allies, while imposing a tariff of 53 percent on imports from a group of 12 countries: Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Egypt, India, Malaysia, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam. In addition, future imports from those countries would be limited to the amount they exported to the United States in 2017.

The third steel option would not impose any tariffs, but would limit shipments from around the world to 63 percent of each country's 2017 exports to the United States.

The three recommended options for curbing aluminum imports follow a similar pattern: a 7.7 percent tariff on aluminum exports from all countries; a 23.7 percent tariff on all aluminum products from China, Russia, Venezuela and Vietnam as well as a quota at 100 percent of their 2017 shipment levels; or a universal quota that would cap imports from all countries at 86.7 percent of their 2017 exports to the U.S.

Mattis weighed in later with his own memo, where he agreed with the findings of the investigations. But the Defense chief cautioned against taking action that could alienate allies.

"DoD continues to be concerned about the negative impact on our key allies regarding the recommended options within the report," Mattis said in the memo.

Mattis also argued that the Defense Department did not believe it was at risk of not being able to get enough steel or aluminum for defense purposes, because the U.S. military's demand for those products is only about 3 percent of U.S. production.

In his memo, Mattis stated a preference for "targeted tariffs" that would focus on certain countries, rather than a global tariff or quota. He also urged the administration to make clear to domestic steel companies and labor leaders that "these tariffs and quotas are conditional," and suggest to them that some action is needed on their part to respond to foreign competition.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's top economic adviser Liu He is expected at the White House Thursday for a meeting with Cohn, Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. China has said it would act to protect its economic interests if hit by steel and aluminum tariffs, although U.S. anti-dumping and countervailing duties on its steel exports have already significantly reduced its shipments to the United States.

Doug Palmer contributed to this report.

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Marlan, Andrew M.

From: Corbett
Sent: Thursday, March 01, 2018 12:03 PM
To: Andrew.B.Flannigan@usace.army.mil; andrew.kirk.8@us.af.mil; brad.entler@ic.fbi.gov; carlos.pinero@navy.mil; Charles.goodrich.6@us.af.mil; david.scott@va.gov; eric.vosler@navy.mil; Gerald.c.charleston.mil@mail.mil; Gerald.w.hall16.ctr@mail.mil; gerard.kinane.1@us.af.mil; james.b.crouch2.mil@mail.mil; jeffrey.trama@va.gov; john.p.cheplis.mil@mail.mil; john.purcell.ctr@marines.usmc.mil; johnm.bailey@va.gov; jonathan.sacks@us.af.mil; Jsacks1@iit.edu; justin.capen@usmc.mil; karla.goodhouse.1 @us.af.mil; ljmeyers@uic.edu; matthew.j.yandura.mil@mail.mil; Michael.aul@us.af.mil; Michael.l.aul.mil@mail.mil; michael.reiser@usmc.mil; michelle.e.rotchadl.mil@mail.mil; Nicholas.t.bugajski.mil@mail.mil; Robert.alvarez@marines.usmc.mil; Robert.b.bland2mil@mail.mil; robert.j.nowakowski2.civ@mail.mil; robert.p.turner@usmc.mil; robert.r.reader@usace.army.mil; ryan.j.blocker2.mil@mail.mil; sarah.bauer@ncis.navy.mil; steven.lindmark@us.af.mil; wade.s.valente.mil@mail.mil; William.dunne.1@us.af.mil; william.e.peters1@navy.mil; William.j.boyle22.civ@mail.mil
Subject: (U//FOUO) Horizon Report - 01 Mar 2018
Attachments: U_FOUO_Horizon_Report_01_Mar_2018.pdf

Good afternoon,

Please find today's Horizon Report attached. Thank you.

P.O. Corbett #4134
Chicago Police Department
Counter Terrorism Section
312-745-5290, Fax 312-745-6927

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Marlan, Andrew M.

From: CPIC <cpic@chicagopolice.org>
Sent: Thursday, March 01, 2018 12:01 PM
To: Katz; Walter; Forde; Janel; Tate-Nadeau; Alicia; Caluris; Steven M.; Panepinto; Leo
Subject: (U//FOUO) Horizon Report - 01 Mar 2018
Attachments: U_FOUO_Horizon_Report_01_Mar_2018.pdf

Good afternoon,

Please find today's Horizon Report attached. Thank you.

Chicago Police Department

Crime Prevention and Information Center (CPIC)
312-745-5669, Fax 312-745-6927

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Marlan, Andrew M.

From: Corbett
Sent: Thursday, March 01, 2018 10:03 AM
To: Wade; Landon J.
Subject: Horizon Report
Attachments: U_FOUO_Horizon_Report_01_Mar_2018.pdf

P.O. Tom Corbett #4134
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Was any of this done in conjunction with the Chicago Police Dept? Were any CPD arrests transferred over to ICE?

Info from ICE is below. Thanks!



ICE arrests 156 criminal aliens and immigration violators during Operation Keep Safe in Chicago area

Editor's Note: The arrest statistics provided in this news release represent preliminary data that has been manually reported to ICE headquarters. Official numbers can vary slightly from preliminary data.



CHICAGO — Federal officers with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) arrested 156 criminal aliens and immigration violators in the Chicago metropolitan area during a six-day enforcement action, which ended Thursday.

During this operation, ERO deportation officers made arrests in the following 37 communities: Addison, Arlington Heights, Aurora, Bartlett, Berkley, Berwyn, Blue Island, Bolingbrook, Bridgeview, Burbank, Carol Stream, Chicago, Chicago Ridge, Cicero, Des Plaines, Elgin, Hanover Park, Hoffman Estates, Geneva, Joliet, McHenry, Mt. Prospect, Naperville, Northfield, North Riverside, Orland Park, Palatine, Park City, Rolling Meadows, Rosemont, St. Charles, Stickney, Stone Park, Warrenville, Waukegan, West Chicago and Wheaton.

Of the 156 arrested, 74 had criminal convictions. One hundred forty-seven men and nine women were arrested; they range in age from 19 to 64 years old.

Aliens arrested during this operation are from the following 11 countries: Mexico (125), Guatemala (10), Poland (6), El Salvador (4), Honduras (4), Philippines (2), Ecuador (1), Jamaica (1), Jordan (1), Lithuania (1) and New Zealand (1).

Most of the aliens arrested by ERO deportation officers during this operation had prior criminal histories that included convictions for the following crimes: battery, commercial sex, criminal trespass (vehicle), dangerous drugs, domestic violence, driving under influence, drug trafficking, felony burglary, homicide, illegal entry, indecency/sex conduct, larceny, obstructing justice, possessing cocaine, possessing controlled substance, possessing marijuana, reckless discharge of a weapon, retail theft, sexual assault, solicitation of a sex act, traffic offense and trespassing.

Fourteen of those arrested were immigration fugitives who have final orders of removal. Thirty-six others illegally re-entered the United States after having been previously deported, which is a felony. Depending on an alien's criminality, an alien who re-enters the United States after having been previously deported commits a felony punishable by up to 20 years in federal prison, if convicted. The remaining 106 arrests were at-large aliens who are illegally present in the United States.

The following are criminal summaries of four criminal aliens arrested in the ICE Chicago area during this six-day operation:

- May 23 — a 42-year-old illegal alien from Mexico and a self-admitted Sureno 13 gang member was arrested near his residence in Chicago. He was twice convicted of willful infliction of corporal injury. He was ordered removed by an immigration judge, and ICE officers later deported him. He later illegally re-entered the United States, and was convicted and sentenced to 12 years in prison for

unlawfully possessing a controlled substance with intent to deliver. He remains in ICE custody pending his removal.

- May 23 — A 41-year-old citizen of Mexico and U.S. permanent resident was arrested in Rolling Meadows, Illinois. He has convictions for retail theft and possessing methamphetamine, which render him removable. He remains in ICE custody pending immigration court proceedings.
- May 24 — A 44-year-old illegal alien from Mexico was arrested outside of McHenry County Jail in Woodstock, Illinois. He was convicted of Battery/Bodily Harm and was sentenced to 18 months' probation. He remains in ICE custody pending his immigration court proceedings.
- May 24 — A 28-year-old illegal alien from Mexico was arrested after a traffic stop in Palatine, Illinois. He was convicted of possessing a controlled substance and sentenced to two years' probation. He remains in ICE custody pending his immigration court proceedings.

These individuals remain in ICE custody pending immigration court proceedings, re-instatement of their prior deportation orders or criminal court proceedings.

"ICE continues to face significant obstacles from dangerous policies created by local officials which hinder cooperation between ICE and local law enforcement," said Ricardo Wong, field office director for ERO Chicago. "Sanctuary cities" not only provide refuge to illegal aliens, but they also protect criminal aliens who prey on people in their own communities. This operation was a great success for all members of our communities. The Chicago area is safer today because of the hard work of the men and women of ERO."

All of the targets in this operation were amenable to arrest and removal under the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act.

ICE focuses its enforcement resources on individuals who pose a threat to national security, public safety and border security. However, ICE no longer exempts classes or categories of removable aliens from potential enforcement. All of those in violation of immigration laws may be subject to immigration arrest, detention and, if found removable by final order, removal from the United States.

Some of the individuals arrested during this operation will face federal criminal prosecutions for illegal entry and illegal re-entry after deportation. The arrestees who are not being federally prosecuted will be processed administratively for removal from the United States. Those who have outstanding orders of deportation, or who returned to the United States illegally after being deported, are subject to immediate removal from the country. The remaining individuals are in ICE custody awaiting a hearing before an immigration judge, or pending travel arrangements for removal in the near future.

More than 100 individuals arrested during this operation were previously released to the streets from local law enforcement despite an active immigration detainer. ICE places detainees on individuals who have been arrested on local criminal charges and who are suspected of being deportable, so that ICE can take custody of that person when the person is released from local custody. When law enforcement agencies fail to honor immigration detainees and release serious criminal offenders onto the streets, it undermines ICE's ability to protect public safety and carry out its mission.

In years past, most of these individuals would have been turned over to ICE by local authorities upon their release from jail based on ICE detainers. Now that many sanctuary cities, including Chicago, do not honor ICE detainers, these individuals, who often have significant criminal histories, are released to the street, which presents a significant and growing public-safety threat.

ICE has no choice but to continue to conduct targeted at-large arrests in local neighborhoods and at worksites, which inevitably result in additional collateral arrests. Such operations are much more dangerous for ICE officers, for the targeted aliens, and for bystanders.

Ultimately, efforts by local politicians have shielded removable criminal aliens from immigration enforcement and created another magnet for more illegal immigration, all at the expense of the safety and security of the very people it purports to protect.